

## Highlighting Eight Case Studies from U.S. Community Colleges

To give readers an understanding of the array of approaches already being used by community colleges to build financial capabilities among students, we looked for cases that had a financial capability component and had received some level of notable recognition. We looked for financial capability efforts that were aimed at building knowledge and skills, while also giving students opportunities to apply these. A mechanism for inducing some type of action leading to behavior change needed to be clearly identifiable. Examples of notable recognition included receiving funding awards to support growth, verifiable local press activity, staff being selected to serve in leadership roles in communities of practice, staff serving in “train-the-trainer” roles for other institutions, and the effort being cited by subject matter experts.

Our cross-section of case studies intentionally represents various implementation stages, designs, levels of resource intensity, and geographic settings.

Demonstrated effectiveness determined by rigorous evaluation methods was not a selection criterion for two reasons. First, such a requirement would have severely limited our case options. For example, some efforts under review are still working out implementation details and are focused on making program improvements. Second, some institutional contacts mentioned their future plans to work with third parties to rigorously evaluate their efforts.

In Table 1, we list the eight financial capability efforts selected for the *Handbook*. They represent a sampling of such efforts under way among community colleges in the United States.

Table 1  
**Case studies discussed in the *Resource Handbook***

Institution and State	Type and Name of Effort	Year Implemented
Foothill College California	Technology Solution: StudentLingo	2010
Valencia College Florida	Peer-to-Peer Mentoring: Financial Learning Ambassador Program	2010
Wake Technical Community College North Carolina	A Multi-Method Approach: SunTrust Foundation Center for Financial Education at Wake Tech	2013
Mt. Hood Community College Oregon	Matched Savings: Matched College Savings Program	2008
Mesa Community College Arizona	Matched Savings: Fast Tracking the Dream	2008
Central New Mexico Community College New Mexico	Financial Stability Center: CNM Connect	2005
Skyline College California	Financial Stability Center: SparkPoint at Skyline College	2009
Community College of Baltimore County Maryland	Financial Coaching: CCBC Cares	2013

From June through September 2013, we conducted research to identify cases that met our criteria. Using an interactive process of contacting subject matter experts, networking with our community college contacts, and conducting keyword searches online, we were able to develop a list of possible efforts to include in the *Handbook* as case studies. The subject matter experts included Individual Development Account administrators working with community colleges, asset-building experts such as the Corporation for Enterprise Development, and implementation experts knowledgeable about financial stability centers, such as MDC. From the list that we assembled, we selected efforts that seemed to be fully developed and that illustrated a range of options for delivering financial capabilities.

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## Case Study | 1

### Technology Solution: Foothill College StudentLingo Program



City, State	Los Altos Hills, CA
City population estimate 2013	8,334 <sup>1</sup>
Campus setting	Suburb: Large
Fall 2013 student enrollment	14,814
Part-time	64%
Female	50%
White	35%
Latino or Hispanic	23%
Black or African American	4%
Other	38%
Pell grants received by full-time beginning undergraduate students	17%
Federal student loans received by full-time beginning undergraduate students	5%

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2013–14, <http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/>

Foothill Community College is located in Los Altos Hills, California, about 40 miles south of San Francisco. Foothill College's student enrollment in 2013 was not much higher than the average student enrollment of approximately 13,000 in the state's more than 100 two-year public institutions.<sup>2</sup>

### Summary

Concerned with a student body burdened by expenses and debt, Foothill College staff considered developing an online program to connect students to resources that could help them manage their finances. Rather than developing their own program, in 2010 the staff found a low-cost, nonresource-intensive solution in Innovative Educator's so-called StudentLingo program.<sup>3</sup> Through StudentLingo, Foothill College students have access to a suite of tip-filled online videos, covering topics ranging from academic preparedness and job readiness to managing stress, money, and the financial aid process. Intended to build skills and resourcefulness among students, this offering signaled a shift for Foothill College, which had historically addressed the immediate financial challenges of its students but had focused far less on financial empowerment activities.

### Area of Need

Many Foothill College students are returning adults who struggle with the cost of raising a family and managing debt; they are potentially facing even more debt to pay for their education.<sup>4</sup> With a large number of first-generation college students who speak English as a second language, the institution serves a population that needs help navigating the system of higher education in a way that works in their favor and fits with their life circumstances.

### Program Description

StudentLingo is an online teaching tool in the form of interactive videos that cover a range of topics tailored to college students both in content and approach. Foothill College offers five categories of helpful topics for students, including Academic & Career Exploration, Reading & Writing Strategies, Learning to Learn, Personal Management, and On-line Learning.<sup>5</sup> Within each category are four to nine subtopics; videos deliver content in accessible, simple language. For instance, "Financial Literacy: Smart Money Skills for College & Beyond" presents the top 10 tips for successful money management. In a series of short videos, the same coach, Danielle Champagne, talks about each tip, sometimes with accompanying images or narrative for emphasis. These tips are presented as rules of thumb, and they aim to develop soft skills such as learning the lingo, getting organized by setting 20- to 30-minute weekly financial appointments with oneself, and making financial goals specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-oriented (S.M.A.R.T.).<sup>6</sup>

The Foothill College StudentLingo home page at [www.studentlingo.com/foothill](http://www.studentlingo.com/foothill) presents two financially focused topics under the category Personal Management: (1) "Financial Literacy: Smart Money Skills for College & Beyond" and (2) "Navigating the Financial Aid Process."

Foothill students have access to 26 modules offered by Innovative Educators. They can watch the videos at their own pace whenever they want and as many times as they choose. After completing the last video within a topic, students are asked to complete an online evaluation survey, which elicits feedback on the video lessons and queries students about how they intend to use the information. While completing the evaluation questionnaire, students have the option of printing a certificate of completion. For students who were

encouraged to complete the lessons by a financial aid advisor, the certificates validate that they had engaged with and completed the lesson(s). For example, an advisor might require a student to complete the financial literacy lesson before being given access to his or her financial aid awards. The hope is that the video tutoring will empower students to wisely use their financial aid award—perhaps even allocating small amounts to supplement their savings in case of a financial emergency. Another scenario may involve a student who is at risk of losing her financial aid due to poor academic performance and is seeking advice about the financial-aid process. A precondition may be completing the video workshop “Navigating the Financial Aid Process.”

### Exploration and Adoption

Foothill College’s endeavors to address the financial struggles of many of its students were complicated by massive budgetary shortfalls across the state of California in the late 2000s. Cutbacks affected all areas of Foothill College’s administration. For example, counseling services was left with only one counselor for every 800 students.

Envisioning an immediate and affordable solution, Foothill College staff brainstormed about developing their own online financial capability curriculum. But the team quickly realized that they lacked the expertise to develop content that would resonate with students. They also grasped that the need to regularly update the information and troubleshoot technical issues was beyond their means.

During a staff retreat attended by Foothill College Student Services personnel and members of various areas of the administration, existing workshops were ranked, according to how well they fit with Foothill students’ needs, possible interests and the college’s infrastructure. The online program developed by Innovative Educators, called StudentLingo, appeared to meet many important criteria. It aligned with Foothill College’s goal of improving student understanding of the implications of their financial decisions. StudentLingo’s content provided guidance on how to use and complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and was available in both Spanish and English. Additional tutorials covered a variety of supplementary topics for college students. An added plus, the interactive videos available through StudentLingo were designed to appeal to both visual- and subject-based learners.

Foothill College administrators soon realized that in StudentLingo they had found a viable option that was likely to benefit all of the student body in more comprehensive ways. Because the incremental cost of adding a topic is minimal relative to the total cost of the program, Foothill would be able to offer its student body nonfinancial categories of content, such as Academic & Career Preparation and Learning to Learn. Depending on the number of topics purchased, the annual cost would range from \$6,000 to \$8,000 with unlimited usage.

StudentLingo’s web-based user interface tracks student engagement with the online workshops, including their progress and how long they spend on each topic.

Inherent to the web-based learning platform, Innovative Educators updates StudentLingo content regularly and provides technical upgrades annually. That the StudentLingo service would include ongoing updating of content appealed greatly to the staff and administration at Foothill College, particularly in the aftermath of the budgetary constraints.

## Implementation

The rollout of StudentLingo required minimal staff time. Foothill College's information technology staff created a navigable link to the StudentLingo online platform on the college website, and some coding was done to enable smartphone compatibility. College staff members were then coached on how to get the word out to students and to the institution at large that this resource was readily available.

Foothill College engaged in a number of promotional tactics:

- StudentLingo video workshop titles were added to a well-known student events list on the Foothill College and Career Connections resource website.
- StudentLingo workshops were highlighted in new student forums.
- StudentLingo promotional materials were placed around campus.
- StudentLingo was featured prominently on Foothill College's website.
- StudentLingo accessibility on smartphones was expedited.

As a supplement to the content offered through StudentLingo, Foothill College sends text messages to remind students to keep on track with their financial-aid planning and their financial goals.

StudentLingo is accessible to all students enrolled at Foothill College. Foothill specifically targets cohorts of students at key decision points and before routines or habits are formed. For example, the college offers StudentLingo's financial-aid video workshops during new student orientation, on financial aid "Cash for College" days, and at high school college nights, at adult student orientation sessions, at parent orientation sessions, and at new student workshops that are held throughout the year. The videos are also used in a class for first-year students that is dedicated to cultivating student success.

Before attending appointments at the Financial Aid Office, students are encouraged to watch certain StudentLingo video workshops to learn more about the basics of student loan borrowing and responsible repayment.

## Utilization and Effectiveness

Foothill College administrators consider StudentLingo as being integral to supporting students in their financial decision making not only on a day-to-day basis but also when it comes to their borrowing behavior. Since putting StudentLingo in place, Foothill has observed a decrease in the number of students who leverage less flexible private loans to fund their education and an increase in the number of students who are served by the Financial Aid Office.

StudentLingo content is designed for individual student use, but Foothill College instructors access content during class time, too. During the 19-month period from August 2012 to March 2014, only 44 users viewed the two financially relevant workshops.<sup>7</sup> But one-quarter of these users were instructors sharing videos during class time, thus reaching more students than the data would suggest. (We note here that student engagement is greater with the nonfinancial topics available on StudentLingo.)

Foothill College needs to investigate to what extent its continual promotion of StudentLingo financial capability workshops indirectly influences students and parents alike, who are continuously being exposed to dedicated messaging about good financial decision making. Foothill Financial Aid advisers have observed that students who engage with StudentLingo are better prepared before meeting with staff. Their knowledge of financial concepts and money management strategies appears to be greater than students who have not used the material.

### Success, Challenges, and Funding

There are no immediate concerns about the sustainability of StudentLingo. With the limited staff time required and the low cost of maintaining the program, it is viewed as an efficient supplement to the in-person support offered to Foothill College students. The college uses institutional dollars to cover the costs of StudentLingo, eliminating the need to seek outside funding.

Early on, one of the major challenges Foothill College faced was getting support for the program from faculty and staff, who were worried about the implications of StudentLingo for their roles within the institution. For example, staff in counseling positions thought that the videos might duplicate what they were already doing. But the passion of the Foothill staff who were leading the effort to connect students with accessible and supportive information proved contagious and helped get the less receptive staff on board. After they realized that the program actually supplemented their work, they came to appreciate having a resource that they could easily make available to students.

Looking ahead, Foothill will concentrate on ensuring that StudentLingo has long-term impacts on students, especially those who are transferring to four-year institutions and who will be faced with more consequential financial decisions. Foothill wants to empower students to develop healthy forms of borrowing and responsible repayment in the future. While StudentLingo offers a solution that is easily disseminated to students in the short term, Foothill is seeking to establish partnerships with experts in the area of college affordability so that it can supplement its offerings to students moving forward.

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### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, State & County QuickFacts. Data was derived from population estimates, the American Community Survey, the Census of Population and Housing, County Business Patterns, the Economic Census, the Survey of Business Owners, the Building Permits Survey, and the Census of Governments.
- <sup>2</sup> Details for this case study were gathered during phone interviews with Denise Swett, vice president of Student Services of Foothill College, on August 23, 2013, and with Kristen Seldon of Innovative Educators on January 13, 2014. IPEDS Data Center. National Center for Education Statistics.
- <sup>3</sup> Innovative Educators (IE) is a for-profit company that provides training that focuses on issues facing students and educators (<http://www.innovativeeducators.org>); as of April 2014, IE has been in business for at least eight years.
- <sup>4</sup> Foothill College estimates that 60% of its students fall into this category.
- <sup>5</sup> <http://www.studentlingo.com/foothill>.
- <sup>6</sup> Edwin A. Locke, "Toward a Theory of Task Motivation and Incentives," *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance* 2, no. 3 (1968): 157-189.
- <sup>7</sup> Foothill College first implemented StudentLingo in 2010, but data were only available from Innovative Educators for the period August 2012 through December 2013.

## Case Study | 2

### Peer-To-Peer Mentoring: Valencia College Financial Learning Ambassador Program



City, State	Orlando, FL
City population estimate 2013	255,483 <sup>1</sup>
Campus setting	City: Midsize
Fall 2013 student enrollment	42,180
Part-time	61%
Female	55%
White	33%
Latino or Hispanic	32%
Black or African American	17%
Other	18%
Pell grants received by full-time beginning undergraduate students	67%
Federal student loans received by full-time beginning undergraduate students	28%

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2013–14, <http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/>.

Valencia College (formerly Valencia Community College) is located in Central Florida and has five campuses — Winter Park (in Winter Park, FL), Osceola (in Kissimmee, FL), Lake Nona, East Orlando and West Orlando. Of the 28 two-year public institutions granting associate's degrees in the state, Valencia is the second largest, with a fall 2013 enrollment of 42,180.<sup>2</sup>



### Summary

Concerned that many student-loan borrowers lack information and guidance surrounding financial decision making, a Valencia College financial aid coordinator experimented with ways to fill the gap through peer mentoring. In 2009, the Osceola campus coordinator worked with three work-study students to set up tables outside the financial aid office to engage with peers about their financial aid refund checks and offer tips on how to manage and save more of those financial aid disbursements each semester. Following an opportunity to apply for grant funding from USA Funds, Valencia expanded its ad hoc operation into a multicampus peer mentoring effort called the Financial Learning Ambassador Program.<sup>3</sup> In the 2012–13 academic year, the program delivered content to at least 5,000 Valencia College students.<sup>4</sup>

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### Area of Need

About 30 students per day sought counseling focused on finances and options for financial aid, thus highlighting the magnitude of financial illiteracy among students at the college. The Osceola campus coordinator of financial aid observed that aside from the verification process, student loans are rather easy to get, have the potential to destroy a student's credit if not managed responsibly, and come with little or no guidance. Despite Valencia's relatively low tuition rate of \$99.06 per credit (approximately \$1,188 per full-time semester) and the high rate of Pell Grant eligibility among the students at the college, they tended to borrow excessively, upwards of \$10,500 per year in some cases. Students with poor personal financial management skills are at risk of failing to repay these loans, which can severely threaten their future financial well-being. The financial aid coordinator was motivated by a realization that students needed to be connected to resources that would help position them to make informed financial decisions.

### Program Description

Valencia's Financial Learning Ambassador (FLA) Program offers peer-to-peer mentoring, workshops, and interactive events. Having three to six trained Financial Learning Ambassadors on each of Valencia's campuses, the program reaches a large cross-section of Valencia's student population. Across the campuses, two main mechanisms are used to engage students.

First, the program has made a deliberate effort to build an internal brand. The FLA mentors wear branded and highly visible lime-green-colored shirts, so they are instantly recognizable to students who tend to pass through campus quickly. Collateral materials share the same lime-green color and a consistent logo. Students can quickly identify who to speak with to receive FLA peer mentoring about personal finances and to learn about related activities.

Secondly, while the content and delivery methods may differ on the basis of student or cohort need, one consistency in the approach of FLA mentors is a strong emphasis on tailored outreach. These include setting up tables for monthly peer-to-peer events to initiate discussions about spending and saving habits, delivering presentations on personal finance

during scheduled class time, or organizing themed events. The FLA mentors are trained not only in content but also in proactive and timely engagement techniques. Examples of unique outreach tactics include the following:

- Creating haunted houses filled with identity thieves and victims at Halloween in October
- Centering activities in November around “Thanksgiving on a Budget”
- Organizing fashion shows, such as “Project Runway to Savings,” that promote tips for affordable clothes shopping
- Devising contract agreements that commit students to save from \$10 to \$20 each month in a FLA–provided piggy bank in exchange for a chance to win a gift card awarded to the student who saves the most by the time of Financial Literacy Week
- Intercepting students who are picking up their caps and gowns on graduation day to discuss student loan repayment and debt management
- Each month Valencia students encounter different points of engagement with the FLA Program. At a minimum within a given month, FLA mentors host one “Skill-shop,” a workshop designed to offer tips on credit, budgeting, and money management. On a less frequent basis, the program may bring in guest speakers who share personal accounts, such as an author and mother who shared details from letters she had written to her daughter about her own financial experiences including accruing student loan debt.

### Exploration and Adoption Phases

In 2009, the then director of financial aid at Valencia College had been engaged in conversations with USA Funds about a financial literacy initiative and suitable options for meeting the needs of Valencia students. In the meantime, concerned by the staggering growth of student loan debt nationwide and over-borrowing trends among students, Valencia’s coordinator of financial aid began experimenting with peer-to-peer financial mentoring carried out by three work-study students.

The student workers set up a table outside the financial aid office to intercept students exiting the office after receiving disbursements of financial aid. At the time, a comment such as: “Hey, how are you going to use your financial aid refund check?” initiated the dialogue. Starting out as an ad hoc operation, the experiment served as a point of leverage when Valencia’s financial aid director approached USA Funds about supporting a more robust financial capabilities initiative. USA Funds later provided grant funding of \$25,000 for an expanded peer-to-peer financial literacy initiative. Valencia had the beginnings of a model that would eventually be extended to all the college’s five campuses.

In addition to leveraging USA Funds, staff members leading the effort collaborated with the college’s student development department, which was in a position to allocate funds to student programs such as the FLA Program.

### Implementation Phase

The early experiment, when work-study students began to offer peer mentoring, shared some aspects with the later, more robust FLA initiative. The financial aid coordinator, who

led the effort, thought that peer mentoring was an ideal way to employ work-study students. Dual benefits would accrue by means of strengthening the financial capabilities of both the work-study students and their peers. The FLA Program recruited and trained ambassadors from the pool of Valencia's work-study students across the five campuses. Concerns about a negative stigma being associated with the label "work-study" prompted the staff members who were designing the program to refer to the peer mentors as "ambassadors."

The qualifications required to be part of the FLA Program include a desire and the motivation to become a trained peer mentor. The student development department considers the applicant pool for Valencia's Student Leader Program to be a source of students for the FLA Program. To engage in active outreach requires an understanding of pertinent material and a level of comfort in public speaking. FLA talks are based on USA Funds training resources and are delivered during scheduled class time. FLA mentors receive content training through USA Funds' Life Skills training program, a 13-module online program, as well as from their peers in the FLA Program. This approach has been successful in developing student competency in peer mentorship and public speaking even among those students who initially seemed to be reserved and quiet.

Although a portion of the grant money received from USA Funds was intended to support operations and training and to bring in guest speakers, the majority ended up being used to support an intentional branding campaign. With six FLA mentors at each of the five campuses and with active, ongoing outreach serving as a key component of the program, a readily identifiable look and feel for the program were considered necessary. The goal was to establish immediate recognition while also building expectations of the FLA Program in the wider institutional community as a means of reinforcing the FLA mentors as a symbol of financial capability. On campus, many Valencia students know what it means when they see peers wearing lime-green shirts.

At Valencia College's five campuses, financial aid staff serve as co-advisors to the FLAs on their respective campuses. The financial aid coordinator on the Osceola campus (who played a leadership role in the initial program design and implementation) has advocated consistency across the five campuses. Each campus has access to a manual to help support consistent implementation. Detailed notebooks contain descriptions of workshops, events, and Skillsshops and marketing materials in the form of flyers created by FLAs to promote monthly events for almost every month of the year. Operational procedures are thoroughly documented in the notebooks in an effort to foster compliance with the guidelines established by the USA Funds grant across the campuses.

### Utilization and Effectiveness

During the 2012–2013 academic year, FLAs engaged with more than 5,000 students<sup>5</sup> at various levels of delivery intensity. Tableside meet-and-greet events and one-on-one mentoring represent the highest degree of touch. Whereas public campaigns, such as promoting the dangers of uninformed financial decision making through offerings such as the thematic haunted house at Halloween, represent the lowest degree of touch.

Valencia College's leadership hopes the program generates positive financial behaviors and informed financial decision making among students. But at this stage, the lone measure used as an indicator of program progress is the number of students exposed to FLA Program offerings. Level of utilization and outcome tracking is a function of resource capacity to collect and analyze data. Currently, the FLA program does not have the capacity to

develop and systematically execute a measurement plan needed to track behavioral changes and other outcome measures of interest.

One aggregate measure that FLA Program leaders monitor is the institution's cohort default rate (CDR), which is an indicator of the percentage of a cohort of student loan borrowers who have defaulted within a set time period. The magnitude of an institution's CDR has implications for its ability to offer federal forms of financial aid.<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note that Valencia's CDR decreased from 18.8% in 2009 to 17.4% in 2010,<sup>7</sup> although many factors may have influenced Valencia's CDR rate. At a student-level, the FLA Program leaders would like to determine the extent to which exposure to and engagement with the program may be contributing to a reduced college CDR.

### **Sustainability, Funding, and Challenges**

Support from USA Funds was critical for growing the ad hoc tableside meet-and-greet effort by the initial three work-study students into a multicampus, fully staffed robust effort. The 2013–2014 academic year is the last year USA Funds will be supporting the program. Valencia's grants department is looking into establishing connections with a local retail bank to assess its interest in funding the effort and providing hands-on training about financial capabilities.

While the college hopes to expand and institutionalize the FLA program, current budget shortfalls need to be overcome. Some degree of institutional support and buy-in has been indicated by providing workspace and capital resources for the FLA Program and by a commitment to using work-study resources to maintain the program. At one point, the program had been run from the financial aid coordinator's office on the Osceola campus.

Advocates and champions within the institution are making the case for a financial literacy department, seeing it as the responsibility of the institution to arm students with knowledge about managing personal finances, especially if they're borrowing money to fund their education at Valencia. One staff member is working on building a collaborative system across campuses to develop a shared vision among institutional staff. FLA Program staff members recognize that the extent to which they're able to measure knowledge and behavioral gains and to follow up with students once they've left Valencia to assess long-term changes will help improve and generate support for the program.

For institutions considering a peer mentoring model as part of a financial capability effort, Valencia College recommends finding a complementary home for the program, such as the student development department. Housing the program in Valencia's financial aid office had been a good fit substantively but not operationally. This was largely due to the incompatibility of the high-volume transactional nature of financial aid operations at the college and the constant activity required by the event planning and coordination efforts of the FLA Program. A partnership between financial aid and student development offers a more reasonable model for the delivery of this type of program.

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## Endnotes

Promoting Pathways to  
Financial Stability:  
A Resource Handbook on  
Building Financial Capabilities of  
Community College Students

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Case Study 2  
Peer-To-Peer Mentoring:  
Valencia College Financial Learning  
Ambassador Program

- <sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, State & County QuickFacts. Data was derived from population estimates, the American Community Survey, the Census of Population and Housing, County Business Patterns, the Economic Census, the Survey of Business Owners, the Building Permits Survey, and the Census of Governments.
- <sup>2</sup> Details for this case study were gathered from a phone interview with Ilia Cordero, manager of Financial Aid Services and coordinator of the Financial Learning Ambassador Program on August 22, 2013. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), <http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/>.
- <sup>3</sup> USA Funds was established as a nonprofit corporation in 1960 in Indianapolis by a group of local business leaders concerned about rising college costs. Since 2000, USA Funds has focused on the development of products and services that help colleges and universities promote student success, while awarding nearly \$150 million in grants and scholarship support to help low-income and other students under-represented in higher education enroll in and complete postsecondary programs. Source: <http://www.usafunds.org/Pages/About.aspx>.
- <sup>4</sup> "Valencia's Financial Aid Default Decreases," <http://thegrove.valenciacollege.edu/valencias-financial-aid-default-decreases/>.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> Shannon M. Looney, Cohort Default Rates in Context (Washington, DC: Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2011).
- <sup>7</sup> "Valencia's Financial Aid Default Decreases," <http://thegrove.valenciacollege.edu/valencias-financial-aid-default-decreases/>.

## Case Study | 3

### A Multimethod Approach: Wake Technical Community College SunTrust Foundation Center For Financial Education At Wake Technical Community College



City, State	Raleigh, NC
City population estimate 2013	431,746 <sup>1</sup>
Campus Setting	Suburb: Large
Fall 2013 Student Enrollment	19,160
Part-time	69%
Female	55%
White	52%
Latino or Hispanic	8%
Black or African American	23%
Other	17%
Age (25 and older)	47%
Pell grants received by full-time beginning undergraduate students	42%
Federal student loans received by full-time beginning undergraduate students	31%

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2013–14, <http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/>.

Wake Technical Community College (Wake Tech) is located in Raleigh, North Carolina. Of the 58 community colleges in the state, Wake Tech is one of the largest, with a fall 2013 enrollment of 19,160.<sup>2</sup>

### Summary

Concerned by the national trend of increasing student loan debt levels and the incidence of default rates among student loan borrowers locally, the president of Wake Tech put out a call to action to increase the financial literacy levels of students and the Wake Tech community. Partnerships were forged with a supportive financial institution and an expert in building financial capabilities. This led to the creation of a multimethod financial literacy initiative tailored to the needs and learning styles of currently enrolled Wake Tech students, General Education Degree (GED) and Adult Basic Education (ABE) learners, prospective students and their parents, Wake Tech employees, and Wake County citizens. Named the SunTrust Foundation Center for Financial Education at Wake Technical Community College, the initiative launched in January 2013 and since then has served hundreds of participants.

Case Study 3  
A Multimethod Approach:  
Wake Technical Community College  
SunTrust Foundation Center For  
Financial Education At Wake  
Technical Community College

### Area of Need

The crippling student loan debt that is a national trend and student loan defaults by Wake Tech students motivated a close examination of the needs of Wake Tech students and community members in the area of personal finance. Learning about what students and community members know and don't know through structured focus groups and interviews was a way to craft tailored responses intended to help them be stewards of their education and financial decision making more broadly.

### Program Description

The SunTrust Foundation Center for Financial Education at Wake Tech Community College offers in-person workshops and online videos, works with Wake Tech faculty to integrate financial education content into their lesson plans, and embeds content into campus events and social networks (in-person as well as through virtual media). The center's workshops are delivered by an expert in the field of financial capabilities from the National Financial Educators Council (NFEC).<sup>3</sup>

Center staff choose content and delivery methods to match the needs of different audiences. Following the launch in early 2013, from January to April, the center delivered 15 events through a variety of methods including workshops, open houses, and professional development training sessions for faculty and staff. The content is tailored to each group. Techniques for budgeting and credit card and student loan management were offered to students, whereas retirement planning and investing were offered to faculty and staff. A focus on student-loan borrowing and responsible repayment was included in an open house for prospective students and their parents.

In addition to in-person standalone events, an NFEC instructor works with faculty to incorporate meaningfully into courses content related to effective management of personal finances. For example, in an economics course, the focus might be on the long-term implications of investing, whereas in a cosmetology class, borrowing and navigating the business loan process would be more helpful to students aspiring to own salons. An array of NFEC online videos are also available on demand, covering money management, savings strategies, responsible borrowing, and planning for future financial goals.



The SunTrust Foundation Center for Financial Education at Wake Tech Community College is more of a conceptual center than a physical center, as content delivery occurs wherever targeted groups gather—whether in classrooms or in service facility space, as in the case of GED/ABE students. This allows for the flexibility to tailor content and delivery methods to the five key groups: Wake Tech students, GED/ABE learners, prospective students and parents, faculty and staff, and Wake County residents.

### Exploration and Adoption Phases

The national trend in rising student loan debt was a motivating factor for conceptualizing the center. The risk of delinquent repayment or default is high among Wake Tech drop-outs, a trend prevalent among public two-year institutions. The college president attributed these trends in part to low levels of financial literacy and insufficient knowledge of how to navigate financial systems and institutions. To fill the knowledge gaps, the president invited student services and the Wake Tech Foundation—the fundraising arm of the institution—to think about developing a financial literacy initiative at Wake Tech.

Student services staff and members of the Foundation came together to brainstorm possible solutions for a financial literacy initiative that would be multifaceted and broad enough for students and the public. At the time, Wake Tech did not have any course offerings that covered management of personal finances, nor did it have a faculty or staff member with the time or experience necessary to teach personal finance. Funding was needed to obtain the expertise to shape financial capability content and delivery.

Wake Tech staff reached out to the philanthropic division of a local financial institution, the SunTrust Foundation, to assess interest in supporting a financial literacy initiative. Willingness to fund the effort was itself important, but Wake Tech was also looking for a funding partner that would champion and help shape the approach to building financial capabilities within the Wake Tech community. The SunTrust Foundation embraced the opportunity to contribute to Wake Tech's financial capability strategy and to associate its institutional brand with the effort.

While Wake Tech administrators were assessing options for funding partners, the staff began to look for content expertise. Flexibility in tailoring content and delivery suitable for diverse audiences was key, since Wake Tech staff envisioned expanding the scope of the initiative to include the wider Wake County community. Wake Tech selected the NFEC as its partner.

At the planning stage, a cross-sectional committee was appointed, consisting of loan specialists, financial aid specialists, Wake Tech faculty and staff, and community members. This group collaborated in making the program a reality.

### Implementation Phase

The SunTrust Foundation Center for Financial Education launched its efforts in January 2013 by offering a series of workshops to GED and ABE students in the ABE Center over a five-week period. The workshops were offered one day per week at two different times (2:30 p.m. and 7 p.m.). They were delivered by an NFEC instructor who shared videos and led students in hands-on activities in the areas of budgeting, financial planning, building credit, eliminating debt, beginning to invest, and the repayment of student loans. A proactive goal of the coursework was to get participants to build an action plan for improving their own financial situations in sustainable ways.

#### Case Study 3

A Multimethod Approach:  
Wake Technical Community College  
SunTrust Foundation Center For  
Financial Education At Wake  
Technical Community College



Initially targeting GED and ABE students was an effective way for the center staff to work out implementation issues, such as where to deliver the first series of workshops and to assess how well the NFEC instructor resonated with students. The generally older GED/ABE students who tended to be juggling more expenses were considered a priority for exposure to the workshop content. The following phase included a series of professional development workshops for Wake Tech faculty and staff.

During the planning phase, a survey was administered to faculty and staff, which revealed the findings:

- 52% reported a moderate to low understanding of “personal finance topics (budgeting, credit, savings, debt, etc.),”
- 83% reported a moderate to low understanding of “retirement planning topics (investments, estate planning, etc.),” and
- 94% believed that courses dedicated to money management would benefit them.

Center staff soon grasped the need for an enhanced financial capabilities approach that was systemic in nature, not just isolated to at-risk students. Building confidence among faculty and staff would empower them to engage in discussions with students and to refer students to the Center’s resources. The targeted professional development workshop on retirement planning and investing covered investment preparation, risk management, inflation, and other areas of personal finance.

The center has also presented a series of workshops and events geared to a wider audience, a sampling of which follows:

- open houses for prospective students and their parents on financial aid and managing personal finances, co-led by a Wake Tech financial aid specialist and an NFEC instructor,
- project-based crash courses for students on a single topic, such as “Building Your Credit Rating,” and
- targeted discussions of financial tools led by Wake Tech financial groups, such as the Economics Club.

Leveraging opportunities for tailoring content is a cornerstone of the center’s efforts. As deemed appropriate, a handful of Wake Tech courses have been infused with financially relevant topics.

Customized delivery methods are being used to reach different audiences. For GED and ABE students, the in-person workshops were believed to be an effective means of content delivery that provided the level of program intensity these students need to work through material. For students who are accustomed to consuming information through online sources, an online learning interface provides 24/7 access to videos and interactive activities.

Ultimately, the justification for advocating that financial literacy content be incorporated into events and existing club activities, as well as into for-credit courses is to maximize the chances of reaching Wake Tech students who are characterized as “C.C.C.” or “Car Campus Car.” With their time constraints in mind, an enhanced version of the infused

approach is in the planning stages. It will aim to include opportunities for directly applying what is being learned in class. A possible example: Assisting cosmetology students to apply for small business loans or to leverage a matched savings account to help them reach their goal.

When recruitment and marketing are needed to attract participants, the center has relied on these types of tactics:

- referrals from Student Services and the financial aid counselors,
- word of mouth through student clubs that have engaged with the center,
- social media postings on Twitter and Facebook,
- campus-wide promotion of events on the Wake Tech website or through marketing materials distributed to departments,
- a “Spring Fling” event that gave students a chance to spend time in a money-booth full of cash and prizes, and
- a financial scavenger hunt for the chance to win an iPod or tablet computer.

### Utilization and Effectiveness

The variety of ways the center delivers content to its audiences makes it difficult to estimate how many people have engaged with the center’s events and offerings. The workshops have reached more GED/ABE students than any other audience. At least 200 students participated in fall 2013. The typical open house may attract 500 prospective students and parents, but it’s likely that only a portion of them interact with the financial aid and education instructors, given the informal, voluntary structure that may attract some guests for just a part of the session.

In the case of a structured workshop series, the center works with the NFEC instructor to administer pre- and post-workshop test surveys to assess changes in financial knowledge among workshop participants. For instance, among GED/ABE students attending workshops in January 2013, a pre-workshop test consisting of 20 items about financial basics showed that only 37 of 79 participants (47%) passed the exam. By the end of the series of classes, post-workshop tests revealed that 72 participants (91%) passed the tests.<sup>5</sup> Qualitative feedback indicated that students felt much more confident about money topics and thought the information would benefit them in the future.

Another method for capturing qualitative insights into students’ grasp of the material is through student testimonials. One student shared her story about acquiring skills and knowledge that she had put into practice. Her story was accessible as an online video for other students to watch. Gathering more testimonials will serve a dual purpose by helping to publicize the center’s resources while also providing center staff with insight about opportunities for program modifications.

### Sustainability, Funding, and Challenges

Wake Tech believes the center is successful due to having cultivated champions across the campus. Partnerships within the institution have created opportunities for bringing tailored content into a variety of departmental offerings and events targeting students and parents, as well as faculty and staff. External partnerships with the SunTrust Foundation and NFEC have been essential to planning, program design, and implementation.

SunTrust Foundation has provided grant funding in the amount of \$35,000 to cover setup costs associated with the center's website, video content, and the NFEC instructor. Moving forward, the majority of funding needed to keep the center operational will be used to cover the costs of the NFEC instructor. Wake Tech continues to seek funding from the SunTrust Foundation and other potential supporters.

Wake Tech administration is confident that the center will continue to serve students and grow. However, recruitment of workshop participants is an ongoing task. Targeting GED/ABE students has been an effective outreach strategy, and infusing financial content into course lessons has helped reach students who might otherwise have been difficult to reach. Wake Tech is also considering using the following tactics:

- having financial education ambassadors promote the college's financial literacy initiatives,
- sponsoring peer-to-peer conversations about the relevancy of financial literacy to their lives, and
- working with NFEC to train students to spread the word about the center's programs and the potential benefits to participants.

The ultimate goal is to integrate the building of financial capabilities into Wake Tech's educational frameworks so that this competency becomes part of the culture. A community-wide cultural shift toward responsibly managing personal finances is a promising trend for the future.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau: State and County QuickFacts. Data derived from Population Estimates, American Community Survey, Census of Population and Housing, County Business Patterns, Economic Census, Survey of Business Owners, Building Permits, Census of Governments.
- <sup>2</sup> Details for this case study were gathered from phone interviews with John Saparilas, associate vice president, Enrollment Services, Wake Technical Community College on July 31, 2013 and January 24, 2014. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), <http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/>.
- <sup>3</sup> The National Financial Educators Council is an independent, for-profit financial literacy resource provider that uses an open source, social enterprise business model, <http://www.financialeducatorsCouncil.org/Financial-literacy-council/>.
- <sup>4</sup> SunTrust is a financial institution headquartered in Atlanta, GA, with a philanthropic arm called the SunTrust Foundation. SunTrust Foundation's mission is to provide monetary support to nonprofit organizations and institutions engaged in activities promoting education, health and human services, culture and art, and civic and community involvement that contributes to the social and economic development of the communities SunTrust serves. SunTrust Foundation Center for Financial Education at Wake Technical Community College *Inaugural Year Financial Literacy Initiative Report*, March 6, 2013.
- <sup>5</sup> SunTrust Foundation Center for Financial Education at Wake Technical Community College, *Inaugural Year Financial Literacy Initiative Report*, March 6, 2013, p. 5.

## Case Study | 4

### Educational Matched Savings: Mt. Hood Community College Matched College Savings Program



City, State	Gresham, OR
City population estimate 2013	109,397 <sup>1</sup>
Campus setting	Suburb: Large
Fall 2013 student enrollment	9,393
Part-time	55%
Female	53%
White	63%
Latino or Hispanic	10%
Black or African American	5%
Other	22%
Age (25 or older)	46%
Pell grants received by full-time beginning undergraduate students	70%
Federal student loans received by full-time beginning undergraduate students	60%

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2013–14, <http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/>.

Mt. Hood Community College (MHCC) is located in Gresham, Oregon, just east of Portland. Of the 17 community colleges in the state, MHCC is the fourth largest, with a fall 2013 enrollment of 9,393.<sup>2</sup>

### Summary

The decision made in 2008 to offer an educational matched savings program to current and prospective students of MHCC has reached hundreds of students and provided a number of staff and faculty with tools designed to build the financial capabilities of students and to help fine-tune services dedicated to their success. As MHCC's Matched College Savings Program has matured, the number of students served has grown from 40 to nearly 400.

### Area of Need

At MHCC, there is a recognized gap between the number of students who need financial aid to pay for their education and the number who actually make use of financial aid. Many MHCC students face barriers to using financial aid, which not only affect their lives in the short term but may lead to different forms of financial debt over the long term. Some students assume they are ineligible for aid due to insufficient documentation to verify need. Others have exceeded the maximum timeframe limit for federal financial aid.<sup>3</sup> Still others don't know how the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) works or how to navigate federal financial aid and student loan options. A lack of resources among students, particularly those with dependents, can pose barriers to staying in school. Combined with the threats posed by different types of long-term debt, MHCC recognized a need to support students in making healthy decisions in the near term as well as in the future.

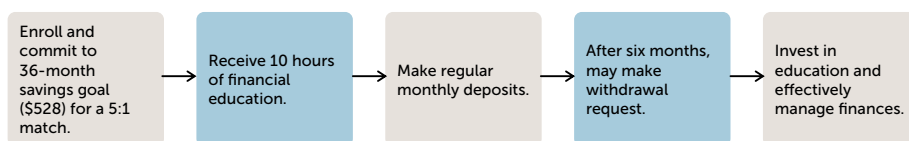
### Program Description

In partnership with Community and Shelter Assistance Corporation of Oregon (CASA of Oregon), MHCC offers students who are currently enrolled in high school or college a Matched College Savings Program aimed at supporting their education-related savings goals.<sup>4</sup>

To participate in the Matched College Savings Program, students must have some earned income or, in the case of college-bound high school students, must have access to earned income through their parents or guardians. Additional eligibility criteria include in-state residence, a household income of less than 200% of the poverty level, and a maximum net worth of \$20,000 (excluding one vehicle and one home).<sup>5</sup> The program offers an incentive to save, earning students \$5 in matching funds for every \$1 they save. Program participants commit to an annual savings goal of approximately \$300 to \$500 and agree to save for anywhere between six and 36 months. The agreement requires them to make monthly deposits into a custodial savings account set up by CASA of Oregon. By the end of their savings period or by the time the students reach their maximum savings goal (whichever comes first), students can earn nearly \$8,000 over and above their own savings, provided they've met all the requirements of the program, including the completion of 10 hours of financial education and six hours of career-readiness training. Lessons on money management and savings strategies are intended to help students navigate consumer choices and plan for unforeseen events. After meeting the financial education requirement, being enrolled for at least six months, and reaching at least half of their savings goal, students may request the use of their savings plus the matching dollars for education-related expenses, such as tuition, fees, and books. CASA of Oregon reviews requests and, if they are approved, cuts checks directly to the respective MHCC office or institution of transfer.

The program includes mechanisms to incentivize saving and encourage investment in the student participants' education. In order to make monthly deposits required to remain in the program, participants must apply what they learn in financial education workshops by saving more and spending less. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1  
**Matched College Savings Program Student Flowchart**



### Exploration and Adoption Phase

Before MHCC began offering the Matched College Savings Program in 2008, efforts were in place to address the specific needs of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. These included support services offered to current MHCC students and underserved youth who were transitioning from high school to community college, as well as MHCC students who were single parents, displaced homemakers, and women who speak English as a second language. Despite MHCC's efforts, the lack of resources among students, particularly those with families of their own, continues to make staying in school challenging.

Prior to learning about the Matched College Savings Program, many staff members working with students recognized a need for “something” to help build students' capabilities to effectively manage their financial lives. Staff had little knowledge of viable options, however, so when CASA of Oregon approached MHCC in 2007 to discuss the idea of an educational matched savings program, the idea sparked significant interest. The vice president of student services and the director of financial aid were both intrigued but unsure what implementation would entail or how program delivery would look.

It became evident that MHCC would need partnerships to get a matched savings program off the ground. Roles would have to be defined, and student needs would have to be assessed more systematically. For instance, what was the typical shortfall that students were facing? One feature of the program is that matching dollars are restricted to education-related expenses, but staff members were aware that both planned and unplanned living expenses affect students' ability to stay in school. MHCC staff was unsure if those constraints and expenses would also limit students' ability to make the required savings deposits. CASA of Oregon's field experience, as well as its research on matched savings programs, provided evidence that lower-income groups do save despite these obstacles.<sup>6</sup>

After experimenting with a formula to identify which students were most likely to succeed, the team concluded that an educational matched savings program was a good fit for MHCC. Since many of its students would qualify for what MHCC thought would be perceived as an appealing opportunity, MHCC did not anticipate challenges with recruitment. Feeling confident in its ability to fill program slots, MHCC signaled its commitment to move forward by working with CASA of Oregon to draft a memorandum of understanding that outlined the program objectives and partner responsibilities.



CASA of Oregon would be responsible for managing and administering the matched savings accounts and for supporting program operations, including fund raising, building relationships with banks, managing matched custodial accounts, and providing technical assistance to MHCC. MHCC would be responsible for outreach and student recruitment and the provision of financial education. MHCC would also need to engage in some degree of case management, such as tracking progress, overseeing the financial education component, and alerting students to late savings account deposits.

### Implementation Phase

In 2008, in partnership with CASA of Oregon, MHCC began offering the Matched College Savings Program to participants of MHCC's Transiciones Program — a career planning and college preparation program for Latina single parents and displaced homemakers, who are studying English as a second language — and shortly after that to participants of the Transitions Program and TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) Program.<sup>7</sup> Subsequently, the Matched College Savings Program was expanded to participants of MHCC's TRIO College First Project, which identifies youths from lower-income families who have the potential to complete high school and enroll in higher education.

The institutional team was comprised of MHCC Student Services staff and the Bilingual and Culturally Diverse Student Retention Coordinator, who also coordinates aspects of the Transiciones, Transitions and TRIO programs in cooperation with the Office of Financial Aid. With 30 slots open in the first year, the program was advertised to 160 students who were thought to be eligible and potentially successful candidates. Unexpectedly, although the students attended information sessions and asked questions, many seemed to view the program as “too good to be true.” They didn't see how they could be expected to save money regularly when emergencies and family situations came up. This concern reaffirmed the importance of the financial education component of the program, which was designed to impart money-management and savings strategies. Eventually, students from Transiciones enrolled in the program. Once a targeting strategy took shape, filling the slots was effortless.

Today, MHCC's Matched College Savings Program is housed in the same vicinity as the TRIO programs, Transitions, Transiciones, and the Oregon Leadership Institute — a program developed by the Oregon Council for Hispanic Advancement intended for Latino high school students. Students usually learn about the Matched College Savings Program after joining one of these programs or becoming involved in MHCC's Associated Student Government or the Student Outreach and Recruitment Team, and many are eligible for the initiative. This recruitment strategy has freed up MHCC staff to focus their energies on supporting students and finding creative ways to deliver the financial education component.

When the program started, MHCC did not have faculty members who specialized in personal financial literacy, and MHCC courses were not well-suited to helping students fulfill that requirement. Consequently, the staff worked with CASA of Oregon to develop a curriculum, and they eventually used an online platform developed by banks called “Hands-on Banking.” The online course includes a user-friendly tracking-and-reporting function to measure progress, completion, and knowledge change.

At the same time, different MHCC staff members were consulting resources to build their own capacity for teaching personal finance. One staff member consulted the free online tool kit offered by the National Endowment for Financial Education (NEFE) to learn how to engage students in in-person financial education classes, customize the content,

and incorporate such interactive exercises as “gamified” budgeting tools.<sup>8</sup> Other interactive methods included homework assignments requiring students to pull their credit reports and build budgets. Staff members also attended training sessions on the effective development and delivery of financial education.

The timing of the in-person classes has been an area of experimentation for MHCC. The number of hours of financial education in a matched savings program may vary from one program to the next, but research has demonstrated that participants’ average monthly net deposits increase per hour of financial education they receive, up to 12 hours over the span of a 24-month program.<sup>9</sup> This is also the amount of financial education recommended by CASA of Oregon. Delivering in-person instruction has taken multiple forms, ranging from eight-hour workshops on Saturdays to less condensed, multi-session workshops given over several weeks. The online lesson content is still used, but it is reserved for independent study as a supplement to in-person classroom time.

Not all of the students who start the program complete it. Some students opt out after realizing the commitment needed or after finding it hard to save regularly. Others withdraw after losing a job, relocating out of state, or making a life choice such as joining the military or leaving school to pursue a full-time job. Students who don’t complete the program are free to withdraw their savings, but they must forgo the matching funds. MHCC addresses student concerns and offers support by providing access to a Matched College Savings Program specialist. This gives students an outlet to discuss their financial difficulties. If students encounter a serious problem, they may request a leave of absence and re-enroll later.

Currently, two program staff members are partially funded through MHCC. Nine additional staff members are involved in the program as part of their institutional roles.

### Utilization and Effectiveness

The number of students served by the Matched College Savings Program more than doubled from Year 1 to Year 2, with CASA of Oregon helping MHCC set up 80 accounts in the second year. Starting small was necessary, but over the previous five years, students have leveraged more than \$300,000 in educational resources through the program. The operation of the program continues to demand high levels of energy and dedication, and today MHCC counts on being able to offer 100 slots per year.

An interesting fact: Although only 9% of enrolled students at MHCC are Hispanic, 80% of the participants from the combined Transiciones and Transitions programs are Hispanic. Moreover, 40% of TRIO-SSS students in the Matched College Savings Plan are Hispanic. As such, content and instruction are offered in both Spanish and English.

Establishing meaningful relationships and trust among staff and students has resulted in a particularly good fit between the Latina participants of Transiciones and the Matched College Savings Program. The program seems to resonate with these participants who are earning an income or seeking job placements. Many of them see the value in developing savings habits, so they are eager for guidance. The MHCC team believes that the Matched College Savings Program has helped strengthen what the Transitions and Transiciones programs have historically offered, and currently more than 300 MHCC students are enrolled. Building on trusting relationships with students, TRIO SSS staff have also refined effective outreach strategies, bringing in 20 accounts annually, with the TRIO College First Project gaining momentum, too. To date, approximately 85% of program participants are



served at the college level and 15% at the pre-college level. Overall, MHCC has found the matched savings program to be a strong fit with its other programs, eliminating the need to work so hard to identify students who meet the eligibility criteria.

According to the coordinator from the Bilingual and Culturally Diverse Student Retention Office, the Matched College Savings Plan serves as a strategy to help retain students. As the program provides students with options for financing their education, freeing up other needed resources, it also appears to strengthen their commitment to their education. Consider that between fall 2010 and fall 2011, retention rates for first-time students at MHCC as a whole were 55% for full-time students and 36% for part-time students.<sup>10</sup> But between fall 2010 and fall 2011, retention rates for students enrolled in the Matched College Savings Program ranged from 80% among students recruited through the TRIO College First Project to 85% among students recruited through TRIO-SSS.<sup>11</sup> Without random assignment, it's unclear how much of the difference in retention is attributable to participation in the Matched College Savings Plan, but these outcomes are being perceived as meaningful to track as a way for MHCC to monitor trends over time and opportunities for program improvements.

### Success, Challenges, and Funding

Both CASA of Oregon and the MHCC team have played critical roles in the growth of the Matched College Savings Program by establishing the partnerships and institutional infrastructure needed to make the program operational. Furthermore, MHCC's strategic approach to recruitment has ensured sufficient levels of uptake to warrant the collective effort required to ramp up the program and increase demand for additional slots.

One lesson that has become clear to MHCC is that there is no magic formula for predicting program success. Pre-implementation efforts to identify students who might be more successful in the program have often not been predictive. Instead of trying to predict success, MHCC has learned that the most effective strategy is to match the program to where the need is clear. The combination of high levels of student need and high levels of student trust in the TRIO, Transitions, and Transiciones programs underlies the recruitment successes that continue today. But even with an effective outreach strategy in place, MHCC staff members have found that it is easy for students to be confused about the mechanics of the program. It is essential to spend time ensuring that the students truly understand what participation entails and what is expected of them in order to receive the potential benefits of the program.

A team of champions and partners shared a vision for student success. MHCC Student Services, TRIO, the Culturally Diverse Student Retention Office, the Office of Financial Aid, and CASA of Oregon all played critical roles in ramping up the program, helping it through early implementation, and ensuring that it continues to run smoothly. Such a commitment is especially important during intensive enrollment periods, which can stretch the capacity of staff, making a well-developed plan crucial. A method MHCC used to supplement its capacity was by forming partnerships with financial literacy professionals in the community and engaging them to lead forums or speak at student events. At this point, the Matched College Savings Program would need additional staff in order to expand its capacity to serve more students.

A common challenge for matched savings programs is finding sources of local dollars to match the federal matching funds. MHCC is fortunate to benefit from Oregon's statewide

program that offers generous tax credits to individuals who contribute to the matched savings program fund. This initiative helps to fund similar matched savings programs in a network of more than 12 educational institutions across the state. In addition, MHCC's program receives funding through the Oregon Alliance of Independent Colleges and Universities. MHCC and CASA of Oregon anticipate continued support for and growth of the program.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, State & County QuickFacts. Data was derived from population estimates, the American Community Survey, the Census of Population and Housing, County Business Patterns, the Economic Census, the Survey of Business Owners, the Building Permits Survey, and the Census of Governments.
- <sup>2</sup> Details for this case study were gathered from informal phone interviews with Cassie Russell of CASA of Oregon on March 18, 2013, and Elizabeth Perry, Eric Juenemann, and Susan Godoy of MHCC on June 5, 2013, and from U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), <http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/>.
- <sup>3</sup> Federal regulations require each college to establish a maximum time frame of aid eligibility. This limit is based on the number of credits students need in order to complete the certificate or degree they have declared. Once students have attempted the maximum number of credits for their declared certificate or degree, they become ineligible for financial aid but may appeal for an extension. See Mt. Hood Community College, <https://www.mhcc.edu/FinancialAid.aspx?id=1177>.
- <sup>4</sup> Community and Shelter Assistance Corporation of Oregon (CASA of Oregon) is a 501(c)(3) established in 1988, originally in response to the housing needs of farmworkers and their families. CASA of Oregon is a community development financial institution and the administrator of the Valley Individual Development Account program — the largest matched savings program in Oregon.
- <sup>5</sup> The asset limit for matched savings programs leveraging federal funds through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Assets for Independence (AFI) program is \$10,000. More recent participants of MHCC's Matched College Savings Program may be funded by Oregon's statewide IDA funds rather than by the AFI funds, so their allowable assets may exceed those set by AFI guidelines.
- <sup>6</sup> Jeanne M. Hogarth and Chris E. Anguelov, "Can the Poor Save?" *Journal of Financial Counseling and Planning* 14, no. 1, 2003. See also Margaret Clancy, Michal Grinstein-Weiss, and Mark Schreiner, *Financial Education and Savings Outcomes in Individual Development Account*, working paper 01-2 (St. Louis, MO: Washington University in St. Louis, George Warren Brown School of Social Work, Center for Social Development, 2001).
- <sup>7</sup> The Transitions Program is a career planning and college preparation program for single parents, displaced homemakers, or women who speak English as a second language. The program helps these students develop a career goal, get to know the college and all its resources, make friends, and develop time management and study skills. Students also learn how to apply for scholarships and to develop life-long career development skills. TRIO-SSS identifies and serves students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The goal of TRIO-SSS is to increase the college retention and graduation rates of its participants and facilitate the process of transition from one level of higher education to the next. It is designed to provide academic and ancillary support to low-income students, first generation college students, and students with disabilities.
- <sup>8</sup> Gamification includes the use of game mechanics (e.g., action points, goals, risk and reward) to engage users in nongame content (e.g., building budgets).
- <sup>9</sup> Clancy et al., *Financial Education and Savings Outcomes* (2001).
- <sup>10</sup> U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).
- <sup>11</sup> Mt. Hood Community College, *Promoting College Access & Retention through Educational Individual Development Accounts (IDAs)* (presentation, Student Success & Retention Conference, Gresham, Oregon, 2012).

## Case Study | 5

### Educational Matched Savings Program: Mesa Community College Fast Tracking The Dream Program



City, State	Mesa City, AZ
City population estimate 2013	457,587 <sup>1</sup>
Campus setting	City: Large
Fall 2013 student enrollment	23,678
Part-time	68%
Female	51%
White	52%
Latino or Hispanic	22%
Black or African American	7%
Other	19%
Age (25 and older)	40%
Pell grants received by full-time beginning undergraduate students	51%
Federal student loans received by full-time beginning undergraduate students	25%

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2013–14, <http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/>.

Mesa Community College (MCC) is located in Mesa City, Arizona, just east of Phoenix. Of the community colleges in the state, MCC is the largest with a fall 2013 enrollment of 23,678.<sup>2</sup>

### Summary

Vision and opportunity merged in Mesa, Arizona, when in 2006 a funder worked with leadership from Mesa Community College and a local social services agency to leverage untapped resources for educational matched savings programming. As an institution serving many at-risk students, in 2008 MCC worked closely with a social services provider to help implement the program called “Fast Tracking the Dream.” Serving 60 students in the first year, by 2012, Fast Tracking the Dream had served close to 400 students. The program won an innovation award to fund the replication of the model across the Maricopa Community College District.

### Area of Need

A large percentage of MCC students and prospective students have overlapping health, wellness, and financial needs. Funding their education while trying to address competing financial demands is one of many challenges. Some are caught in the cycle of poverty, whereas others are enduring homelessness, dealing with domestic violence, or managing a mental health issue. Many prospective MCC students are in need of not just financial but also comprehensive support. The financial challenges that accompany attending school are real, but they are made much more difficult when there are overlapping issues.

### Program Description

In partnership with a local social services agency called A New Leaf, Mesa Community College began offering an educational matched savings program to eligible students beginning in 2008.<sup>3</sup> Named Fast Tracking the Dream, the program offers MCC students an opportunity to earn \$3 in matching dollars for every \$1 they save, up to a maximum of \$1,000 over a two-year period. Matching funds are raised through the federal Assets for Independence (AFI) program and local sources such as foundations, financial institutions, colleges, and individual donors. The students make regular monthly deposits into personal savings accounts set up by A New Leaf. With the 3-to-1 match, students can earn up to \$3,000 over and above their personal savings, which they can use for education-related expenses, including tuition, fees, books, supplies, and electronics. The program has evolved to also offer a tiered approach for students who have smaller financial needs. Instead of saving a maximum of \$1,000, for instance, some students who enroll in Fast Tracking the Dream commit to a lower savings goal of \$500 or \$750, which is still matched at a rate of 3 to 1.

To participate in the program, students must take a free financial literacy workshop offered by A New Leaf either online or at its facility in downtown Mesa. It requires three hours of in-person instruction or five hours of online instruction. The instructors for the in-person workshop are from a local credit union that is housed in the same building as A New Leaf. With a focus on basic money management and savings strategies, the workshop is designed to build the capacity of students to make sound spending and savings decisions.

Students may request withdrawals from their savings plus the matching dollars after they’ve reached half of their savings goal and fulfilled the workshop requirement. Withdrawal requests are reviewed by A New Leaf, and, if they are approved, they are processed accordingly. Checks are sent by A New Leaf to the appropriate institutional office (for example,

to the Office of Financial Aid for tuition and fees payments or to the bookstore for books and computers).

In order to enroll in the Fast Tracking the Dream program, students must have a personal income of less than 200% of the poverty level and a net worth below \$10,000.<sup>4</sup> Students must also be earning income. While Fast Tracking the Dream is open to all students who meet the eligibility criteria, its location in the Center for Community & Civic Engagement, which operates the AmeriCorps program, attracts many AmeriCorps members, who are eligible to earn education awards in exchange for service to their local communities.<sup>5</sup>

Depending on the term of service completed, students enrolled in MCC's AmeriCorps program receive stipends in exchange for their service as well as education awards that can be applied to qualified school loans or current tuition costs. In 2013, MCC's average annual tuition was \$2,280, and the maximum annual AmeriCorps Education Award was \$1,458.<sup>6</sup> AmeriCorps members who participate in Fast Tracking the Dream may deposit money from their stipends into their savings accounts.

Fast Tracking the Dream participants are required to deposit a minimum of \$25 consecutively for six months to stay enrolled in the program, and active AmeriCorps members must deposit a minimum of \$10 consecutively for six months. Whenever missing monthly deposits extends beyond six months, a case manager from A New Leaf is assigned to assess the situation and then attempts to help the student get back on track. By making the minimum six months of deposits, students can remain enrolled in the program as long as they continue to meet the requirements (for example, completing the financial literacy workshop, staying enrolled at MCC, and making deposits or working with a case manager if they are unable to do so).

### Exploration and Adoption Phase

In March 2006, the United Way of Mesa was involved in helping A New Leaf assume operational control of a community action network called MesaCAN. In the process, it was observed that MesaCAN was entitled to, but not using, federal grant funding of approximately \$1 million for matched savings programs. The United Way of Mesa understood the need to act quickly to prevent the loss of these funds and also realized that they had an opportunity to shape the use of the funding. Given the CEO's strong commitment to increasing the educational attainment of low-to-moderate income residents of Mesa, starting an educational matched savings program at MCC seemed like a viable option.

MCC wasn't actively searching for a new intervention when it was approached by A New Leaf and the United Way of Mesa. However, leaders were receptive to the idea because of the overlapping needs that existed among its students. Leaders from the United Way of Mesa, A New Leaf, and MCC convened to assess the program's potential and the shared buy-in of the group.

MCC's leadership was aware of the social services needs of its students, given their high rates of poverty, homelessness, domestic violence, and mental health issues. The CEOs of A New Leaf and the United Way of Mesa approached MCC to discuss an educational matched savings program. Because the program would be administered by a well-regarded social services agency, MCC agreed to a partnership. The next challenge MCC faced was in educating potential supporters and implementers about matched savings programs.

Building the interest of stakeholders was the easy part; they were on board from the start. But as is required for all matched savings programs, the partners needed to identify sources of local matching funds to implement the program. Representatives from the United Way of Mesa, A New Leaf, and MCC devoted significant time to presenting the idea to potential supporters, including friends, local banks, and local businesses. They described the program mechanics and assured them of the viability of the plan.

Dedicated infrastructural support for the program took the form of virtual space dedicated to the program on MCC's website, physical space on campus, and the cooperation of the Financial Aid Office to anticipate and apply tuition and fee payments processed by A New Leaf on behalf of MCC's students.

Upon signing a memorandum of understanding (MOU) and making major decisions about the program design, administrators turned their attention to getting the program operational. MCC staff would be assuming new roles with new partners and assessing student interest.

### Implementation Phase

One major decision that faced MCC was where to house the Fast Tracking the Dream program. They considered the Financial Aid Office, because its staff members were keenly aware of student financial challenges and how they can impede ongoing enrollment at MCC. But with enormous caseloads, Financial Aid did not have the capacity to work with every student facing financial challenges. Moreover, MCC was concerned that housing the program in the Financial Aid Office would make Fast Tracking the Dream seem like "just another program." Ultimately, MCC decided to house the program in the Center for Community & Civic Engagement, which opportunistically placed it in close proximity with the AmeriCorps effort on campus.

Students in the AmeriCorps program are likely candidates for Fast Tracking the Dream for several reasons:

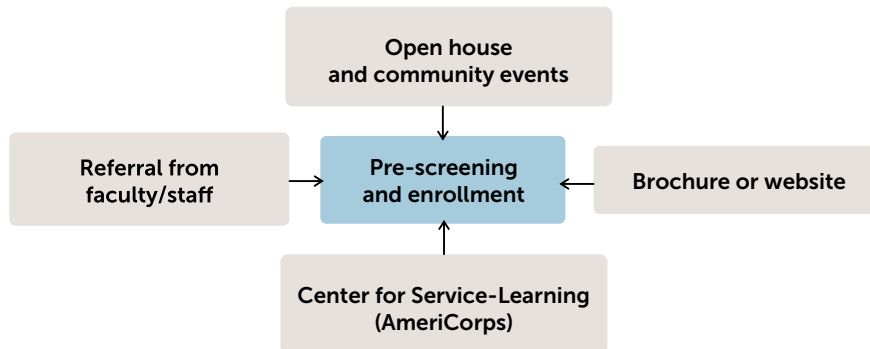
- AmeriCorps members tend to be financially disadvantaged, and they work in local communities as a way to fund their education.
- Through stipends, AmeriCorps members earn money regularly, which would enable them to deposit monthly savings, a requirement of the Fast Tracking the Dream program.
- By leveraging A New Leaf's social services model, the AmeriCorps members would readily find opportunities to fulfill their service commitment.

MCC students would learn about the benefits of the Fast Tracking the Dream savings program, its eligibility requirements, and how to apply for the program in a variety of ways: at the Center for Community & Civic Engagement, through brochures or in advertising on the college website, through community events, at school open houses for parents and students, and through referrals by college faculty or staff. (See Figure 1.)

A New Leaf representative was onsite at MCC a few days per week to assist with recruitment, enrollment, and case management.



Figure 1  
**Fast Tracking the Dream Outreach and Recruitment**



Students having difficulty making regular savings deposits work with a Fast Tracking the Dream liaison. The liaison is able to monitor student progress through transactional data shared by the participating financial institution, which enables the liaison to follow up with case management, whenever needed. A New Leaf considers the student's situation and prioritizes the problems that he or she is facing in order to address the most serious problems first, which may necessitate a referral to a partner agency. If a student leaves MCC, his or her enrollment in the Fast Tracking the Dream program is terminated. The student is contacted and reminded that he or she can gain access to the personal savings but must forgo the matching funds. If the student cannot be tracked down, the savings revert to a beneficiary whom the student had listed on the account.

Fast Tracking the Dream participants are case-managed by A New Leaf staff, according to requirements that MCC had outlined in the MOU. The application of the matching funds to education-related expenses is treated like a scholarship by the MCC Office of Financial Aid. Students must maintain a C average (a 2.5 GPA equivalent) to be eligible to have the funds applied. Otherwise, funds are returned to the pool of matching dollars to make it possible for other Fast Tracking the Dream participants to leverage them.

Another decision MCC and A New Leaf faced was how best to deliver the financial education piece to Fast Tracking the Dream participants. Initially, MCC administrators wanted to offer it through the institution. But students were already too time-constrained, and building the infrastructure to offer the content to participants was impossible. Instead, MCC and A New Leaf agreed to leverage A New Leaf's free financial literacy workshop that is offered in coordination with a local credit union in downtown Mesa. The workshop is also available online.

Invisible to participants of the Fast Tracking the Dream program is the back-end administration required to operate the program. As the matched savings program administrator, A New Leaf establishes a partnership with financial institution(s) to set up the custodial account for each participant's savings deposits and to hold the reserve dollars for allocating the matching funds.<sup>7</sup> In their own name, students make monthly savings deposits into these special accounts at the specified financial institution. This occurs regardless of whether a student already has a relationship with another bank or credit union. Neither the program participants nor MCC are involved in the selection of the financial institution(s)

or even aware of the parameters of such partnerships. This illustrates the critical role of A New Leaf in facilitating the asset-building component of the program.

### Utilization and Effectiveness

During the first year of implementation, 60 students were enrolled in Fast Tracking the Dream. Between August 2008 and December 2012, the program served 391 students. The program has helped students leverage savings of \$261,309 with matching funds of more than \$783,926 to finance their education and education-related expenses.<sup>8</sup> More recently, in 2012–2013, the program has paid out \$133,581 in matching funds to help MCC students pay for tuition, books, and supplies. Most students (90% in 2012–2013) applied the funds to tuition and fees, followed by books and supplies. On average, 80–85% of participants graduate from the Fast Tracking the Dream program. Reasons for attrition include voluntary withdrawals as well as noncompliance with the requirements of the program.

In its role as the matched savings program administrator, A New Leaf uses applicant tracking system software to monitor participants' status and progress in the program, their savings goals, and amounts spent across educational expense categories. Data analysis enables A New Leaf to recommend possible program improvements to MCC. For instance, an unexpected pattern was observed: enrolled MCC students had been requesting amounts to be applied to their tuition that were less than the maximum savings plus matched amount of \$4,000. This pattern led to the recommendation and implementation of a tiered savings approach in which participants still need to commit to a specific savings goal but may choose from lesser amounts at the time of enrollment.

In another instance, A New Leaf personnel realized that certain students had been struggling to use the on-campus computer lab in the evening to complete school assignments (due to limited bus schedules). Including computer equipment as an allowable, but verified, education-related expense allowed these students to purchase the necessary equipment that would enable them to access computing services remotely.

In addition to tracking the financial behavior of student participants, A New Leaf has access to the participants' educational outcomes, as agreed to by MCC. Such data can be included in its reporting to MCC and funders. Analysis of this educational data has demonstrated the greater persistence and higher-than-average GPAs of Fast Tracking the Dream participants relative to average levels for MCC students. This has helped justify the continuation and growth of the program.<sup>9</sup> The fall 2011 term-to-term retention rate for Fast Tracking the Dream participants was 94.2% compared with 63.6% for MCC overall.<sup>10</sup> Without demographically identical comparison groups, however, MCC cannot wholly attribute differences in retention rates to Fast Tracking the Dream. But the outcomes are useful for understanding aspects of the program that are more or less effective and for understanding how different target audiences interact with the program.

### Success, Challenges, and Funding

MCC's Fast Tracking the Dream program was the recipient of the 2012–2013 Maricopa Community Colleges Innovation of the Year and Paul Pair Award. The award consists of a five-year grant of \$500,000, of which up to \$100,000 per year can be used for matching funds and to support the replication of Fast Tracking the Dream across the Maricopa Community College District, which includes 10 community colleges.



Part of the reason for the award was the demonstrated effectiveness of MCC's program. But an equal—if not greater—impetus was that longtime funder of the Fast Tracking the Dream program, Helios Education Foundation, recommended that the program be expanded throughout the Maricopa Community College District.

The United Way of Mesa has also been involved since the start and has committed to providing \$60,000 to the Fast Tracking the Dream program for the next three years.

While the innovation award and continued support are certainly encouraging, there are still areas that MCC considers challenges. For instance, it sees the financial literacy workshop offered by A New Leaf as an area of opportunity and future improvement. Additionally, the case management offered by A New Leaf to MCC students who miss their scheduled savings deposits is a possible area to expand upon so that the social services needs of students who are in good standing in the Fast Tracking the Dream program are not overlooked. In both of these cases, more resources would need to be allocated to expand the services, and a greater level of student engagement would be required. They remain on the radar as possible program improvements.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, State & County QuickFacts. Data was derived from population estimates, the American Community Survey, the Census of Population and Housing, County Business Patterns, the Economic Census, the Survey of Business Owners, the Building Permits Survey, and the Census of Governments.
- <sup>2</sup> Details for this case study were gathered from phone interviews with Kristen Litt, Eva Felix, and Kathy DiNolfi of A New Leaf on August 16, 2013, December 16, 2013, and December 18, 2013, respectively, and with Jared A. Langkilde, director of development, Mesa Community College on December 24, 2013. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), <http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/>.
- <sup>3</sup> A New Leaf is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) human service agency founded in 1971 to address drug problems plaguing Mesa's public schools. It has grown to provide services across a spectrum of needs to nearly 20,000 individuals annually. See [http://www.turnanewleaf.org/a\\_new\\_leaf](http://www.turnanewleaf.org/a_new_leaf).
- <sup>4</sup> Income and asset eligibility requirements are stipulated by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Assets for Independence Program (AIP). AIP contributions are used to fund half of the matching dollars of MCC's Fast Tracking the Dream program. Additional details were provided by Jared A. Langkilde, director of development, Mesa Community College on December 24, 2013.
- <sup>5</sup> AmeriCorps is a national service program initiated by President Bill Clinton. AmeriCorps members help address the nation's needs in the areas of economic opportunity, education, environmental stewardship, disaster preparedness, veterans and military families, and healthy futures.
- <sup>6</sup> See <http://www.mesacc.edu/its-all-at-mcc/exceptional-value> and <http://www.mesacc.edu/service-learning/ameriCorps>.
- <sup>7</sup> It is possible for matched savings programs to be set up at more than one financial institution where one holds custodial accounts and another reserve accounts.
- <sup>8</sup> See <http://mcli.maricopa.edu/innovate/winners>.
- <sup>9</sup> Students participating in Fast Tracking the Dream are required to have a minimum 2.5 GPA to leverage matching funds. The extent to which program involvement motivates academic performance is unknown.
- <sup>10</sup> Personal communication with Mesa Community College Office of Research and Planning (February 2014).

## Case Study | 6

### Financial Stability Center: Central New Mexico Community College CNM Connect



City, State	Albuquerque, NM
City population estimate 2013	556,495 <sup>1</sup>
Campus setting	City: Large
Fall 2013 student enrollment	28,891
Part-time	67%
Female	56%
White	32%
Latino or Hispanic	46%
Black or African American	3%
Other	19%
Age (25 and older)	47%
Pell grants received by full-time beginning undergraduate students	62%
Federal student loans received by full-time beginning undergraduate students	25%

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2013–14, <http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/>.

Central New Mexico Community College (CNM) is located in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Of the nine two-year public institutions in the state, CNM is by far the largest, with a fall 2013 enrollment of 28,891.<sup>2</sup>

### Summary

With its origins in the Annie E. Casey Foundation Center for Working Families model, which calls for bundling education and employment services, work and income supports, and financial and asset-building services, Central New Mexico Community College's "CNM Connect" program has seen tremendous growth. CNM was the first community college to implement the model, and the CNM Connect program grew from, in 2005, serving 31 at-risk students out of a mobile facility equipped with half a desk to more than 10,000 students and community members in dedicated facilities across seven CNM sites by 2013.

### Area of Need

More than 10 years ago, staff at CNM's School of Adult and General Education, working with prospective and current CNM students across a range of supports including GED, English as a second language (ESL), and developmental education, observed that low retention rates among these students were associated with not only poor academic performance but also financial challenges. These students presented multiple risk factors for dropping out, but staff were surprised to learn that the most commonly recurring topic was money. CNM staff sought a way to connect more students—even those who were ineligible for financial aid—to public benefits and financial coaches to mitigate the risk that financial challenges pose to students' educational investment. A related goal was to increase students' capacity to manage future challenges and plan for the future.

### Program Description

In 2005, CNM piloted a Center for Working Families (CWF) model that was conceptualized and funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.<sup>3</sup> The CWF approach bundles essential economic supports in accessible locations and aims to help families build self-sufficiency, stabilize their finances, and move ahead. The core pillars of the model include (1) education and employment services, (2) work and income supports, and (3) financial and asset-building services.<sup>4</sup>

CNM's model, which grew out of a CWF approach, is called CNM Connect. It currently has 12 full-time coaches dedicated to helping students achieve their educational goals. The services that it provides are primarily located in centers that have been specifically designed to be inviting places

- where students want to gather,
- where staff, students and their peers interact in a friendly atmosphere,
- where students can study and work, and
- where students can enroll in and receive services and programs.

CNM Connect works with any student who needs support across one or more of the core pillars. A student may be seeking only one thing—such as assistance in putting an appeal packet together to prevent the loss of financial aid—but may end up receiving multiple

services (see the “Utilization and Effectiveness” section). CNM Connect supports students with academic and life goals by connecting them with internal CNM resources as well as external community resources. Specific services include but are not limited to the following:

- free tax preparation,
- legal services for noncriminal issues,
- performance-based scholarships,
- workshops on time management and overcoming test-taking anxiety,
- one-on-one academic and financial coaching, and
- access to an Individual Development Account (IDA) administered by an external community partner called Prosperity Works.<sup>5</sup>

Students enter the program in various ways. In fact, CNM Connect believes: “There are no wrong doors through which students can access college.” An actual physical space exists for students, but CNM Connect seeks to develop a shared philosophy among faculty and staff who are expected to work with students in ways that support their goals. The idea is that even those students who never step foot in the center can experience the CNM Connect philosophy:

- Any staff member can help promote awareness of available resources.
- Faculty members can use modes of instruction that promote greater levels of student engagement.
- Any person—faculty, staff, or peer—can provide a strong connection to a student if difficulties arise.<sup>6</sup>

### Exploration and Adoption Phase

Prior to the creation of CNM Connect, the Center for Working Family (CWF) model had been adopted by nonprofits nationwide but to a lesser degree among educational institutions. Aligned in many ways with what community colleges were already doing in terms of career preparation, connection to career pathways, and financial supports, in recent years the model has increasingly been adopted by colleges.<sup>7</sup> CNM was the first community college to test it.

A confluence of events led to the piloting of the CWF model at CNM. Concerned with the low retention rates of those taking developmental education and GED courses, the college’s School of Adult and General Education was seeking solutions to address the problem. At the same time, the Annie E. Casey Foundation was beginning to enter the educational sector with the CWF model. But openness to strategies and support were not shared unanimously across CNM’s stakeholders.

The college president lent support to the initiative, keeping in mind how best to roll it out in a way that would help it be successful. Believing that those implementing the pilot had certain requirements—the right staff to get it off the ground, the freedom to start the program somewhat discretely, and the room to learn through trial and error—the college leadership sought to remove pressure and facilitate experimentation. At the same time, staff who were

selected for the pilot were aware that CNM's data-driven president would be seeking evidence of utilization and success as a requirement for providing continued support.

### Implementation Phase

Leadership selected staff from CNM's School of Adult and General Education to pilot the CWF model. This method increased the likelihood that they would have the necessary level of dedication and competence to make the model operational.

In the earliest days of implementation, the CNM staff who were working to launch the CWF services restricted the program to a narrow target audience. They used scholarships to recruit students who were enrolled in developmental courses and in the Career Technical Education programs.<sup>8</sup> Research indicated that those who were taking these courses were doing the least well and were deemed to be at high risk for dropping out. Students who were interested in learning more about the services offered could meet with staff in the makeshift point of contact—a portable location situated in a parking lot with half a desk and a half-time coach.

An early win for the program was its fit with existing CNM departments. For instance, financial aid staff were interested in and wanted to help those students who were at risk of losing their aid packages regain their good standing. But with caseloads of over 10,000 students, the staff simply lacked the resources. Staff members who deliver the CWF services have the capacity to establish relationships with students, can help them submit appeals to the Financial Aid Office, and can try to connect the students with benefits and scholarships—both performance-based and emergency-based.<sup>9</sup>

As the CWF model grew, it was rebranded as “CNM Connect” for several reasons. Early on, there had been no actual center, so calling it the “Center for Working Families” was misleading. In addition, it was important to the staff and the leadership that CNM take ownership of the model that had its origins in the CWF approach. Giving it a different name helped it to do this. However, it still retains the principles of the CWF approach, which calls for:

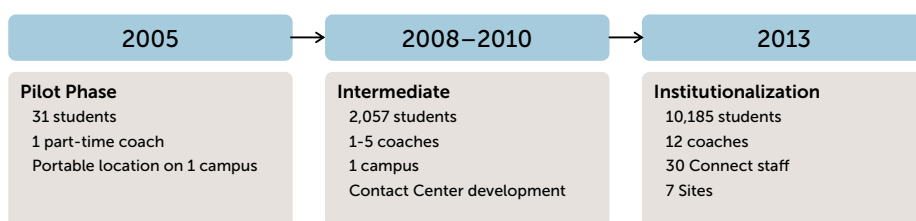
- the bundling of services across the three pillars of education and employment services, work and income supports, and financial and asset-building services;
- the use of coaches to provide one-on-one financial and academic supports; and
- the leveraging of partners to augment CNM's efforts that are deemed vital to ensuring financial stability.<sup>10</sup>

As the identity of CNM Connect was taking shape, so, too, were the hiring requirements. Initially, the implementation team didn't have the resources to hire more than a half-time coach. But during the next three years, there were anywhere from one to five full-time coaches. Competent staffing was essential to the program's success, not only to ensure quality delivery of the model but also to avoid the inefficiencies and interruptions that result from staff turnover. As the executive director of CNM Connect points out, it was also important to discover job candidates' attitudes about supporting disadvantaged students. Those who saw welfare recipients as undeserving or lazy would not be suitable. As CNM Connect has diversified its funding base, moving from grant-funded to institutionally funded positions, the pool and quality of job applicants has increased.

Today CNM Connect is quite different from its early days of delivering services from a portable location. There are currently 12 full-time coaches housed in purpose-built facilities across seven sites. Coaches offer students one-on-one assistance with academic and career challenges as well as with issues related to managing personal finances and learning how to build assets. In-person coaching is supplemented by a call center and online support designed to answer questions from students as well as non-students who contact CNM. A 12-week for-credit course on financial education that is offered through the business department allows CNM Connect to deliver more support to at-risk students. Staff promote the for-credit course offering to those who can benefit from the information but who may not need intense services. CNM Connect's identity as a separate institution led to the biggest changes, as shown by the shift from a narrowly defined target audience to any student and a public commitment to the philosophy of CNM Connect.

The CNM president has supported the model and the “no wrong door” philosophy both symbolically and strategically. Her goal is to instill a sense of responsibility in all employees of the college who work with students. At an annual staff convocation a few years ago, CNM distributed T-shirts reading “I am CNM Connect” to all college staff. During personnel meetings, the president regularly impresses upon the audience the importance of the principles of CNM Connect and the role that all staff play in its delivery. On a more strategic level, by allocating institutional dollars to create the infrastructure of the program and develop it, she has helped CNM Connect go from serving 31 students on one campus in 2005 to more than 3,500 across seven sites within fiscal year 2013. (See Figure 1 for cumulative figures.)

Figure 1  
**Evolution of CNM Connect**



Source: Data for 2013 were provided by Ann Lyn Hall, executive director, CNM Connect Program (February 5, 2014). See also <http://www.cnm.edu/student-resources/get-help/our-story>.

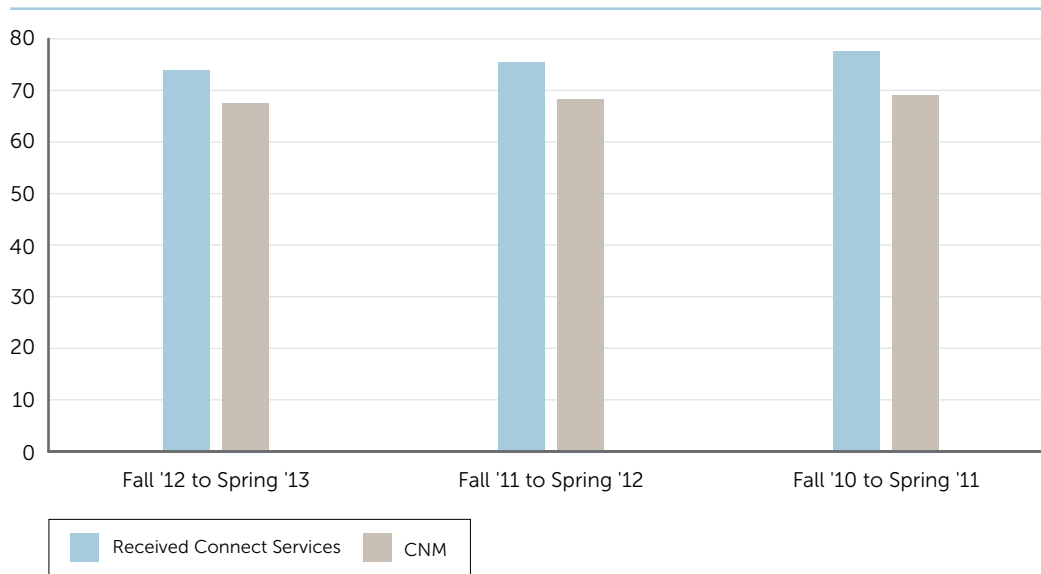
### Utilization and Effectiveness

Having implemented this evolving program for nine years, CNM is the community college with the most experience at using a Center for Working Families approach.<sup>11</sup> The reach of CNM Connect has been broadened through expanding its target audience from a restricted group to any student, as well as through the use of technology as an alternative means to connect. The result has been a marked increase in the number of students served.

The demographics of the students served also have changed over time, partly as a result of the change in recruitment strategy. When CNM staff used scholarships to recruit students, the program tended to attract older students who were interested in financial assistance. Younger students have proven to be more responsive to CNM Connect's broader programmatic offerings.

Figure 2

### Term-to-term Student Retention by Receipt of CNM Connect Services



Source: Ann Lyn Hall, executive director, CNM Connect Program (February 5, 2014).

Of the services currently offered, the most utilized are in the areas of education and training. This is followed by income and work supports, primarily in the form of financial assistance to students, and then by financial services.<sup>12</sup>

The underlying principle of CNM Connect is that bundled services meet the needs of students better than a fragmented approach to service delivery. The extent to which students access multiple services varies. Of the 2,086 CNM students served in 2010, 56% received services falling under two of the three core pillars of the CWF approach, and 30% received services in all three pillars.<sup>13</sup> A 2009 study of CNM students who received CWF services found that those who received bundled services from more than one core pillar were four times more likely to achieve short-term-indicator outcomes (e.g., receive a scholarship or attend college in the next semester or receive financial aid) and four times more likely to achieve major economic outcomes (e.g., remain in a job more than 12 months or receive an employment certificate or earn a GED) than students who did not receive bundled services.<sup>14</sup>

Relative to the term-to-term retention rate at CNM as a whole, for the past three years, CNM Connect has observed a higher percentage of returning students. (See Figure 2.)

Additional indicators of CNM Connect's program performance will be derived from a national study testing the effectiveness of participation in the Suncat Savings Challenge (CNM Connect's IDA program). It will provide CNM Connect with access to such indicators of financial capabilities as savings behavior and money management among students who are interested in participating in a matched savings program. The study will include random assignment of 600 interested and eligible students into program and comparison groups.<sup>15</sup>



### Success, Challenges, and Funding

Strong leadership at the institutional level has been critical to the success of CNM Connect, but it has also been essential to have multiple levels of leadership. While the college president has lent support in visible and strategic ways, she also handed much of the responsibility to the team that led the implementation and that now handles the ongoing operation of CNM Connect. The team that led the effort has been successful partly due to their initiative and follow-through but also because they've earned the respect of the CNM community by demonstrating a strong commitment to students' success and to the value of CNM Connect to the institution.

CNM Connect's leadership plays a role that is not always welcome in college settings—namely, challenging the status quo—but their colleagues have come to expect it from them. In effect, CNM Connect has become a model of successful collaboration. While its growth has been robust, challenges accompanying the rise from a boutique model to an institutionalized one remain.

Just as in the pilot in 2005, CNM Connect had to work out some kinks to ramp up, and it continues to do so as it has grown. In keeping with the philosophy of CNM Connect, one goal is to ensure that all employees exemplify the value of the model through their work, and methods for bringing Academic Affairs and faculty members into the model are being developed. For instance, CNM is piloting a faculty fellows program that would excuse faculty from teaching for a year so that they could take on projects in their area of expertise that support the goal of student success.

As the program has become institutionalized, CNM Connect has recognized the need to adopt the same data tracking system that is used by the college. It was difficult for the CNM community to communicate with students when the college and CNM Connect were using different information-sharing platforms.

CNM Connect has benefited from a combination of outside funding, starting with the Annie E. Casey Foundation in 2005, and institutional-level strategies to help bring the model to scale. Grant funding has been imperative to CNM Connect's growth, but many funders are more interested in funding projects rather than operations. Whenever a new approach demonstrates positive results, CNM Connect has found it necessary to seek alternative funding streams to keep it going. This was especially challenging three years ago, when CNM faced a 30% budget cut. In search of a solution, the college developed an incentivized early-retirement program that was used by at least 80 staff members. This paved the way for reallocating dollars to the growth and institutionalization of CNM Connect.

CNM Connect's leadership saw value in thinking about scalability even during the initial pilot phase. To this day, if CNM leadership does not see the value in sustaining a grant-fundable position beyond the life of a grant, more likely than not, CNM Connect would decline such an opportunity for funding. Thinking about what the model, if institutionalized, would look like through the different phases of growth has greatly influenced the current shape of CNM Connect. That said, after nine years of learning, modifications, and growth, CNM Connect's executive director regards the early efforts to find an appropriate target audience for the pilot as a valuable decision.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, State & County QuickFacts. Data was derived from population estimates, the American Community Survey, the Census of Population and Housing, County Business Patterns, the Economic Census, the Survey of Business Owners, the Building Permits Survey, and the Census of Governments.
- <sup>2</sup> Details for this case study were gathered from a phone interview with Ann Lyn Hall of CNM Connect on December 5, 2013. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2011–12, <http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/>.
- <sup>3</sup> Established in 1948, the Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charitable organization based in Baltimore, MD, that is dedicated to helping build better futures for children at risk of poor educational, economic, social and health outcomes in the United States.
- <sup>4</sup> Cynthia D. Liston and Robert Donnan, *Center for Working Families at Community Colleges: Clearing the Financial Barriers to Student Success* (Durham, NC: MDC, Center for Working Families, April 2012).
- <sup>5</sup> Administered by Prosperity Works, Individual Development Accounts offered through CNM Connect's Suncat Savings Challenge are matched savings accounts that leverage matching dollars through local sources and the federal Assets for Independence program. This allows students to save for home ownership, small business enterprise, or post-secondary education expenses. See <http://www.cnm.edu/student-resources/get-help/suncat-savings-challenge>.
- <sup>6</sup> Central New Mexico Community College, CNM Connect, "Our Story," <http://www.cnm.edu/student-resources/get-help/our-story>.
- <sup>7</sup> Liston and Donnan, *Center for Working Families at Community Colleges* (2012).
- <sup>8</sup> At CNM, Career Technical Education is a terminal degree program encompassing all trades, technologies, health care, business, and education.
- <sup>9</sup> "Rust Scholarships" were offered as a form of emergency gap funding, ranging from \$200 to \$300.
- <sup>10</sup> Dan Broun et al., *The Working Families Success Strategy. College Implementation Guide* (Durham, NC: MDC, Center for Working Families, 2013), [http://wfsncollegeguide.org/wp-content/themes/workingfamiliesuccessstrategy/pdfs/MDC\\_WFS\\_all.pdf](http://wfsncollegeguide.org/wp-content/themes/workingfamiliesuccessstrategy/pdfs/MDC_WFS_all.pdf).
- <sup>11</sup> Liston and Donnan, *Center for Working Families at Community Colleges* (2012).
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup> Kimberly Burnett et al., *Pathways to Success: An Interim Analysis of Services and Outcomes of Three Programs* (Baltimore, MD: Annie E. Casey Foundation, June 2009).
- <sup>15</sup> <http://www.cnm.edu/student-resources/get-help/suncat-savings-challenge>.
- <sup>16</sup> <http://www.cnm.edu/student-resources/get-help/our-story>.

## Case Study | 7

### Financial Stability Center: Skyline College Sparkpoint at Skyline College



City, State	San Bruno, CA
City population estimate 2013	42,443 <sup>1</sup>
Campus setting	Suburb: Large
Fall 2013 student enrollment	10,067
Part-time	74%
Female	52%
White	20%
Latino or Hispanic	29%
Black or African American	4%
Other	47%
Age (25 and older)	36%
Pell grants received by full-time beginning undergraduate students	40%
Federal student loans received by full-time beginning undergraduate students	2%

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2013–14, <http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/>.

Skyline College is located in San Bruno, California, just south of San Francisco. Of the 112 community colleges in the state, Skyline College is just below the median size of approximately 11,000, with a fall 2013 enrollment of 10,067. Skyline College is part of a three-college district in the county of San Mateo.<sup>2</sup>

### Summary

With a shared vision among faculty and staff for producing equitable outcomes across a diverse student body and a community gripped by inequality, Skyline College explored an Annie E. Casey Foundation Center for Working Families–inspired model. In anticipation of sufficient funds becoming available, Skyline College managers traveled the country visiting Center for Working Families (CWF) initiatives in order to build their knowledge and expertise around this model that would signal an entirely new approach for Skyline College. Starting with grant funding from the United Way of the Bay Area and the Bay Area Workforce Funding Collaborative, in May 2009, Skyline College began planning for a CWF–inspired United Way SparkPoint Center. It was launched as a pilot effort in November 2009, and, by fiscal year 2012–2013, it was serving 2,015 participants<sup>3</sup>.

### Area of Need

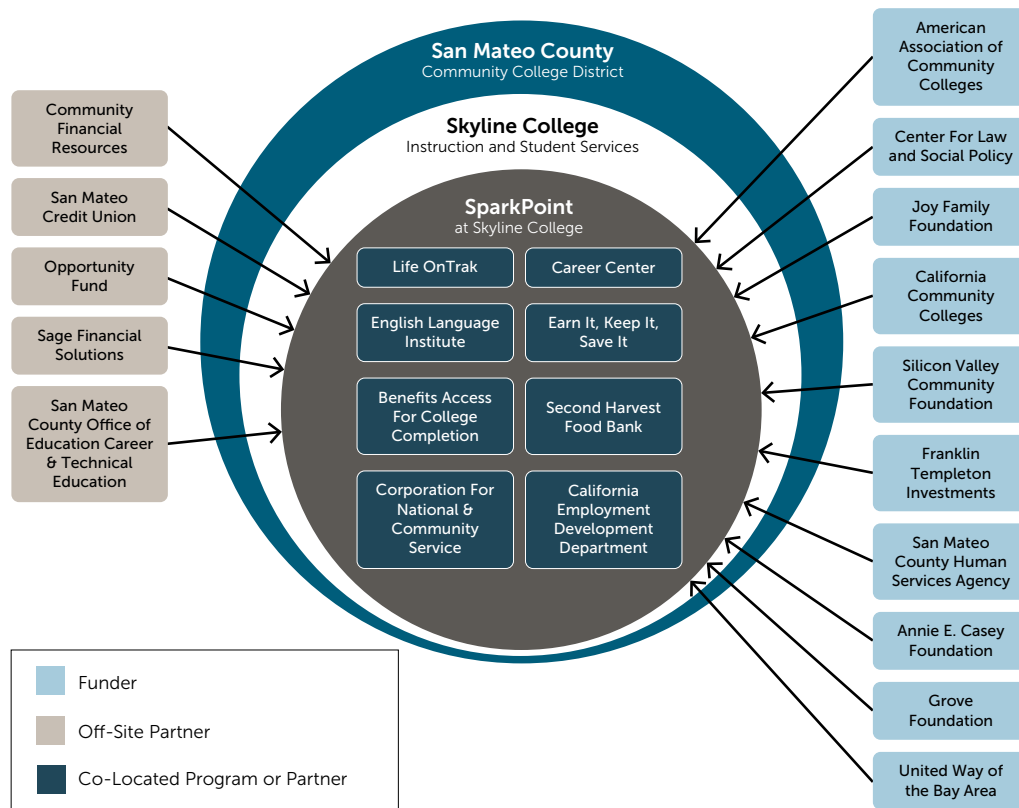
Skyline College is one of the most ethnically diverse community colleges in California. It is located in wealthy San Mateo County, where significant disparities exist in the ability of its residents to participate in the economy. San Mateo’s minority residents are disproportionately overrepresented in the percentage of the population that lives below a standard of sufficiency, and they are underrepresented in the vital institutions that are required to fully participate in the community and economy.<sup>4</sup> Concurrent with the recent economic downturn, student need has shifted from more typical challenges, such as insufficient money to buy textbooks or cover fees, to not enough food to eat and inadequate shelter.<sup>5</sup>

### Program Description

SparkPoint at Skyline College is an Annie E. Casey Foundation Center for Working Families–inspired model that bundles core services to populations in need of support. One of 10 United Way SparkPoint Centers in the San Francisco Bay Area, SparkPoint at Skyline College is the only one that is housed at an educational institution. Broadly speaking, the services fall under three core pillars: (1) employment and career advancement; (2) income and work; and (3) financial services and asset building. Actual services falling under the three pillars include financial coaching and asset building through an individual development account (IDA), workforce development and connection to career pathways, a food pantry, English as a second language classes, legal assistance, voluntary income tax assistance, help with screening and enrollment for public benefits, and financial aid and college affordability supports.

SparkPoint at Skyline College is both a physical location and a campus-wide network of services. The physical location is open to students enrolled at Skyline College as well as to non-enrolled students and members of the community.<sup>6</sup> SparkPoint offers Skyline’s existing programs and services but also partners with multiple organizations to provide a continuum of services to students and members of the community in what is aimed to be a seamless fashion. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1  
**SparkPoint at Skyline College Services and Partnerships**



Source: William Watson, director, SparkPoint at Skyline College,  
<http://www.skylinecollege.edu/sparkpoint/partners/>.

Although SparkPoint at Skyline College is open to all students and members of the community, some of the services offered require that a person meet certain eligibility criteria. For example, to participate in an IDA administered by the Opportunity Fund, a candidate must demonstrate income- and asset-limitations.

### Exploration and Adoption Phase

Much of the credit for helping to establish a shared vision at Skyline College can be credited to the president of the institution, Regina Stanback Stroud. At a 2007 managers' retreat when she was vice president of instruction, she asked participants to brainstorm about how to address the fact that minority populations in San Mateo County are disproportionately affected by poverty and absent from civic life. A strategic planning session devoted to this issue served to clarify and solidify a shared vision of striving for equitable outcomes for residents and students served by Skyline College. Viewing the educational institution as being instrumental in initiating and maintaining efforts to mitigate the effects of disparities on an array of outcomes was seen as a breakthrough.

With this shared vision in place, Dr. Stanback Stroud presented a model inspired by the Annie E. Casey Foundation Center for Working Families. Her colleagues were immediately persuaded that the CWF model was exactly what they needed in order to achieve their collective vision. Not only were the three pillars of employment and career advancement,

income and work, and financial services and asset-building what residents and students needed, but the emphasis on partnerships, which are required to make the model operational, represented a strong fit with Skyline College.

Surrounded by many large employers in Silicon Valley, including Genentech, YouTube, Walmart, and other Fortune 500 companies, Skyline College created the Center for Workforce Development and in the process developed a competency in cultivating partnerships for the purpose of shaping the center's offerings to meet local workforce needs. Skill in partnership-building would prove critical in the early stages of implementation of a CWF-inspired model, since it calls for connecting individuals to one or more supports in order to achieve financial stability.

When the Skyline team began thinking about implementing a CWF model, the Annie E. Casey Foundation had already selected a few colleges that it would work with to set up CWF initiatives. Skyline College was not among the initial cohort, but staff members benefited from meetings at the Annie E. Casey Foundation, site visits, and technical assistance, thereby learning as much as possible about the CWF model and how it is implemented.

In a proposal called "Strengthening Student Services," Skyline College sought funding through the Bay Area Workforce Funding Collaborative. This funding supported Skyline College in the planning process that would prove essential to later implementation. It helped Skyline forge partnerships with key players, including the California Employment Development Department, the Jewish Vocational Service, and the United Way of the Bay Area. This also enabled a group of Skyline College's managers to travel to observe community colleges that had implemented CWF models, including Des Moines Area Community College and Central New Mexico Community College. (See Resource Handbook, Case Study #6.) This time spent making invaluable connections and gathering extensive information helped prepare Skyline College for an imminent opportunity: The United Way of the Bay Area was planning to launch CWF-inspired models under the name "SparkPoint Centers" at 10 sites in the area.

The timing of Skyline College's interest in finding a way to address disparities among local residents and students coincided with a major economic downturn across the state of California and nationwide. The state's education budget was slashed. Many at Skyline College questioned whether it made sense to invest in seeking new solutions when the college, like many businesses and major institutions at the time, was facing severe budget shortages. Dr. Stanback Stroud stood firm and argued that doing nothing in these challenging times would only exacerbate already wide disparities.

As a result, the goal of ensuring equitable outcomes became pervasive in strategic planning at Skyline College. This philosophy is not necessarily shared across educational institutions, but with a view to both institutional effectiveness and social justice, Skyline College is committed to reconceptualizing how best to educate students.

### Implementation Phase

Being chosen as a site for a United Way of the Bay Area SparkPoint Center provided Skyline College with seed funding as well as access to a consistent network of experts and colleagues to help inform its implementation. Skyline participated in a regional community of practice led by the Bay Area Workforce Funding Collaborative and the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Centers for Working Families Community College Learning Network (now

called the Working Families Success Network). Skyline's access to expertise and the readiness of the model greatly facilitated implementation planning, since the college was able to envision the content and the delivery of the programs and services.

Typically in the pilot phase of an initiative, offerings may be limited to a target group, but SparkPoint at Skyline College was open to everyone from the start. Certain programs and services have eligibility criteria that must be met, such as the matched savings program that is offered through the Opportunity Fund, but for offerings without eligibility rules, students and residents alike could visit the center as soon as it opened. The launch of the SparkPoint Center was promoted broadly on Skyline College's website, in newsletters, through advertising by partners, and in general press releases to the community.

While the model is multifaceted and the service offerings are many, the intended outcomes of the SparkPoint Center are focused and succinct. For students and residents served by the center, the goal is to help them do the following:

1. achieve a self-sufficient outcome,
2. repair and build credit (i.e., achieve scores greater than 650),
3. build a safety net of savings ranging from three to six months of income, and
4. reduce debt-to-income ratio to below 40% of monthly earnings.<sup>8</sup>

Depending on where a participant starts out, certain outcomes are more relevant than others, but in all cases, one constant in the model is its bundled-services approach, which has been shown to result in stronger outcomes than when one service alone is used.<sup>9</sup>

Crucial decisions that Skyline College had to make included where to house the SparkPoint Center and how to staff it. Also, since partnerships are critical components of CWF-inspired models, Skyline needed to apply its competency in partnership building. Both the Center for Workforce Development and Student Services (home of the Financial Aid Office) were approached as possible locations for the center. They seemed like obvious candidates, since both of these divisions are committed to helping students in ways beyond the academic, much like the SparkPoint Center would be. The Financial Aid Office was concerned about the resources needed to launch a new initiative, so the college decided to house SparkPoint at Skyline College in the Center for Workforce Development, under the direction of Dr. William Watson. This turned out to be a good fit, since the Center for Workforce Development was eager to get SparkPoint off the ground. Later, a new vice president of Student Services was hired, Dr. Joi Lin Blake, and SparkPoint at Skyline College was relocated to Student Services with great success. Dr. Watson moved with SparkPoint to Student Services to continue building the services and resources needed to fully implement the model.

The move to Student Services has been important for a number of reasons. According to feedback from visitors to the SparkPoint Center at Skyline College, there is no longer a stigma associated with receiving financial aid, and this now extends to the services provided at the center. At the community college level, students who leverage financial aid, including Pell Grants, neither stand out nor perceive themselves as different from their peers who don't (see the "Utilization and Effectiveness" section). Moreover, it makes logical sense to

students and community members who are seeking help with their personal finances that SparkPoint's financial coaches are located in Student Services.

The staff at SparkPoint includes employees of Skyline College as well as partners outside the college. The center director is a Skyline College academic manager and a member of the Student Services leadership team. There are also two financial coaches who are paid employees of Skyline College.

The coaches were selected based on two main criteria: their level of education and professional experience, and their shared vision for social justice and equitable outcomes, which underpins SparkPoint's work. The coaching positions have different job descriptions but similar tasks. The financial aid technician, who must have a bachelor of science degree or the equivalent, is responsible for financial coaching, and the counselor must have a master's degree and be able to teach a course related to student success along with a self-sufficiency course that is transferable to a California State University. Having both types of coaches at the center means that there is coverage for both students and nonstudent community members. While some visitors to the center are seeking a coach who can also provide academic counseling, others are there to use the food pantry or to get help preparing their taxes.

Additional roles at the SparkPoint Center at Skyline College are filled by outside partners who spend varying amounts of time on campus. The work of onsite partners and, to some extent, offsite partners is grant-funded or self-funded, and their commitment and contributions to SparkPoint are cultivated by Skyline College's leadership team.

Skyline College uses a systematic process to forge partnerships. It invites potential partners to engage in an assessment process designed to help inform progress, priorities and goals, and work plans. Partners also engage in integration planning to determine the extent and sequence of services and to develop strategies for moving forward. With its experience working with partners to ensure the alignment of the institution's offerings with the needs of the local workforce, Skyline has grown partnership development into a core competency.<sup>10</sup>

There are various levels of partnership, ranging from the least intense "courtesy acquaintance" to the most intense "functionally integrated partner," with shared power and budgeting authority. This sorting process helps establish both parties' shared expectations vis-à-vis operations and accountability. The level of partnership also determines the type of agreement needed, which could be a memorandum of understanding, a contract, or a subagreement.<sup>11</sup>

### Utilization and Effectiveness

With so many moving parts involving Skyline College staff and partners and the use of services by both students and community members, SparkPoint at Skyline College required a monitoring system with robust tracking and reporting capacity. The center uses commercially available, Web-based case management software that aids in connecting efforts to demonstrable outcomes. Implementation of the software was a major undertaking that required significant programming on the front end to enable meaningful data tracking and reporting, but within a few years, SparkPoint staff has grown to rely on it.

As a supplement to the programmatic data tracked in the ETO database, SparkPoint staff also engage students in focus groups to get a sense of their perceptions of and experiences with SparkPoint services. Findings from the focus groups demonstrate that the SparkPoint



Center has been successful in removing stigma associated with leveraging its services. Coupling the center with financial aid services has been an effective strategy to this end.

The utilization of SparkPoint Center at Skyline College services has grown steadily between its implementation in 2010, when 1,250 students and community members were served, and fiscal year 2012–2013, when this number grew to 2,015.<sup>12</sup> While the served population includes primarily Skyline College students, at least 600 of those served are non-enrolled residents of the community. Another portion of the total number served includes non-enrolled Skyline College students who have at least generated a student identification number by applying for admission or financial aid. These include students who have dropped out, completed their courses, or are in between enrollments due to financial or other life circumstances.

Skyline College has observed higher term-to-term persistence rates among students who have leveraged up to three SparkPoint services. In 2012, the fall-to-spring retention rate was 94% for SparkPoint students compared with 56% for Skyline College students in general. While a controlled study has not been undertaken, SparkPoint is working on a research proposal to conduct a rigorous study of users of SparkPoint services in order to compare them with similar nonusers by means of propensity score matching techniques.<sup>13</sup> A demographically similar group of nonusers will serve as a control group for comparison purposes. By identifying Skyline College students who possess similar characteristics to SparkPoint users, such as the same number of credits and the same type of classes, the institution will have more confidence in the findings.

### **Success, Challenges, and Funding**

SparkPoint at Skyline College can mirror a CWF-inspired model only up to a certain extent, since the ideal implementation would include service integration across all partners with common budgeting authority. This cannot fully happen at Skyline College because of the way the institution is structured, with oversight from the San Mateo County Community College District (SMCCCD), which is a political subdivision of the state of California. The United Way of the Bay Area contracts with SMCCCD, which disburses the funds.

Sizable funding for SparkPoint at Skyline College was provided by the Bay Area Workforce Funding Collaborative, which invested \$600,000 between 2009 and 2012. Additional funding came from a variety of sources, including the United Way of the Bay Area, the Grove Foundation, the California Community College Chancellor's Office, the San Mateo County Human Services Agency, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation.<sup>14</sup> Skyline College is planning to institutionalize the center by leveraging funding called Fund 1, the primary operational budget of the college.

Through Fund 1, Skyline College intends to supply key SparkPoint positions by using increasing amounts of institutional dollars, with 25% covered in the first year of the institutionalization plan; 50% in the second year; 75% in the third year, and 100% in the fourth year. This will decrease the reliance on external funds and may help retain strong talent as the center is further integrated within established college processes.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, State & County QuickFacts. Data was derived from population estimates, the American Community Survey, the Census of Population and Housing, County Business Patterns, the Economic Census, the Survey of Business Owners, the Building Permits Survey, and the Census of Governments.
- <sup>2</sup> Details for this case study were gathered during an informal phone interview with William Watson, Ed.D., who is director of SparkPoint at Skyline College, January 28, 2014. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2011–12, <http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/>.
- <sup>3</sup> William Watson and Joi Lin Blake, “SparkPoint at Skyline College. Mitigating Economic Disparity: Financial Self-Sufficiency and College Completion,” presented at the Community College League of California Annual Convention, Burlingame, CA (November 2013), <http://www.skylinecollege.edu/sparkpoint/about/documents/CCLCPresentation.pdf>.
- <sup>4</sup> The district uses a Self-Sufficiency Standard that calculates the annual cost to meet monthly expenses at the county level based on household composition. See Struggling to Make Ends Meet in the Bay Area. Financial Self-Sufficiency Report 2009 (San Francisco, CA: United Way of the Bay Area, 2009), [http://www.unitedwaysca.org/images/stories/make\\_ends\\_meet\\_report.pdf](http://www.unitedwaysca.org/images/stories/make_ends_meet_report.pdf).
- <sup>5</sup> Regina Stanback-Stroud, History of SparkPoint at Skyline College (undated), [http://www.skylinecollege.edu/sparkpoint/about/documents/HistoryofSparkPointatSkylineCollegeRSSSprkptWebsite\\_revised.pdf](http://www.skylinecollege.edu/sparkpoint/about/documents/HistoryofSparkPointatSkylineCollegeRSSSprkptWebsite_revised.pdf).
- <sup>6</sup> Non-enrolled students are those who went through the enrollment process but never earned credits or stopped taking for-credit courses.
- <sup>7</sup> William Watson (<http://www.skylinecollege.edu/sparkpoint/partners/>).
- <sup>8</sup> Watson and Blake, “SparkPoint at Skyline College. Mitigating Economic Disparity” (2013).
- <sup>9</sup> Kimberly Burnett et al., Pathways to Success: An Interim Analysis of Services and Outcomes of Three Programs (Baltimore, MD: Annie E. Casey Foundation, June 2009).
- <sup>10</sup> William Watson, “Community Colleges Building Partnerships with Community Based Organizations: Benefits Access for College Completion,” presented at the Benefits Access for College Completion meeting, Miami, FL (January 2012), <http://www.skylinecollege.edu/sparkpoint/about/documents/CommunityCollegePartnershipsBACCConveningMiami-January2012.pdf>.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup> Watson and Blake, “SparkPoint at Skyline College. Mitigating Economic Disparity” (2013). Cynthia D. Liston and Robert Donnan, Center for Working Families at Community Colleges: Clearing the Financial Barriers to Student Success (Durham, NC: MDC, Center for Working Families, April 2012).
- <sup>13</sup> Propensity score matching is a statistical matching technique used to compare groups that are statistically similar in characteristics thought to be associated with outcomes of a given treatment or intervention. It removes the bias that arises because of the apparent difference in outcome associated with two groups. Propensity scores are useful when trying to draw causal conclusions from observational studies where the “treatment” (i.e. the “independent variable” or alleged cause) was not randomly assigned.” Source: Penn State Methodology Center, <http://methodology.psu.edu/cresources/ask/fa07>.
- <sup>14</sup> Liston and Donnan, Center for Working Families at Community Colleges (2012).

## Case Study | 8

### Financial Coaching: Community College Of Baltimore County CCBC Cares



City, State	Baltimore, MD
City population estimate 2013	622,104 <sup>1</sup>
Campus setting	Suburb: Large
Fall 2013 student enrollment	23,981
Part-time	67%
Female	60%
White	45%
Latino or Hispanic	4%
Black or African American	38%
Other	13%
Age (25 and older)	42%
Pell grants received by full-time beginning undergraduate students	59%
Federal student loans received by full-time beginning undergraduate students	22%

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2013–14, <http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/>.

The Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) is located in Baltimore, Maryland. Of the 16 public two-year institutions in the state, CCBC is the second largest, with a fall 2013 enrollment of 23,981.<sup>2</sup>

### Summary

The Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) began a program to increase financial awareness and empowerment of students after it realized the direct relationship between race, socio-economic status, and academic achievement and witnessed an increase in impoverished students enrolling in the college. Efforts started with a simple strategy of handing out piggy banks to first-year students in an orientation course. This light touch program had broad reach, resulted in actual savings of more than \$70,000 from spring 2011 to fall 2013, and highlighted the potential for building financial capabilities among the CCBC student body. But administrators acknowledged the need to offer financial coaching to students who were experiencing an acute financial crisis. The aim would be to move students beyond their current crisis into a position to better manage their personal finances moving forward. With this in mind, a more intense, but narrowly focused program, was implemented in 2013, named CCBC Cares (Community and Academic Resources for Educational Success).<sup>2</sup>

### Area of Need

The majority of students enrolled in courses at the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) live at or below the poverty line. These students face social and economic challenges of budget shortfalls, housing insecurity, and food insecurity. Many of these challenges affect students' educational experiences at CCBC and interfere with their ability to focus on the demands of school. Historically, CCBC made efforts to address acute financial challenges but the institution was concerned about the lack of tools available to help students become competent in navigating financial systems and routinely making healthy financial decisions.

### Program Description

CCBC Cares is a financial coaching program modeled after the coaching piece of the Annie E. Casey Foundation Center for Working Families Community College Learning Network initiative (now referred to as the Working Families Success Network). CCBC Cares offers financial coaching tailored to the level of student need in achieving an articulated financial goal. (In this *Handbook*, see the case studies of how this approach has been implemented in the Central New Mexico Community College CNM Connect program and the SparkPoint Center at Skyline College in northern California.)

CCBC Cares is designed to help students work toward financial goals by using a three-tiered approach based on the level of service needed. The first tier is resource-focused and might include connecting students to needed resources such as scholarships. The second tier involves light touch financial counseling. The third tier offers more time-intensive structural support, referred to as scaffolding. Students who receive scaffolding coaching might spend an hour or more with the coach during each visit, whereas students seeking guidance on scholarship options spend much less time with a coach. Some students may come in seeking guidance on resources but find they need to leverage more intensive tiers of service. A student who would qualify for scaffolding coaching might have many inter-related financial goals, such as developing a personal budget, devising a savings plan, and charting a path to home ownership.

The coaches take each student's financial circumstances into consideration when thinking about the steps required for a student to reach his or her financial goals. Helping the students break their goals into specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound (S.M.A.R.T.) steps is integral to the approach.<sup>3</sup>

### Exploration and Adoption Phase

CCBC had experimented with efforts to improve the financial knowledge and skills of its students before implementing CCBC Cares. Concerned about the prevalence of student need for emergency assistance to deal with unforeseen expenses, in 2011, CCBC's initial response was to pilot a program called "Money Matters @ CCBC," which consisted of a series of financial literacy-focused lesson plans that were embedded into the first-year orientation course. The goal was to engage students in discussions of the financial dimensions and consequences of their decision making. It also sought to reinforce the importance of savings and to encourage savings behavior by providing each student with an actual piggy bank. While the program was light touch, it grew to reach more than 17,000 students and provided a means for students to accumulate emergency savings. To help students facing financial crises, CCBC also offered emergency assistance funds with CCBC Foundation dollars.

Students are able to apply for emergency assistance, which, if approved, is disbursed directly to creditors, such as utility companies. On the part of the student, the program entails very little contact with the creditor, since payments are delivered electronically to third parties. As important as the program is in addressing financial crises, it's not designed to help students make good financial decisions moving forward. To help fill this gap, college administrators sought to provide students with the tools that could reduce their vulnerability to such financial crises and, more importantly for the long term, help them achieve their financial goals. This marked a shift from a student-deficit approach (intervening on behalf of the student to deal with a financial crisis) to an asset-based approach.

When administrators learned about the Annie E. Casey Foundation Center for Working Families model, they believed they found a useful tool. While they never intended to implement the full CWF model at CCBC, components of it and types of expertise applied to previous implementations in community college settings seemed relevant and promising. CCBC was most interested in the financial coaching piece of the CWF model and explored the possibilities of bringing that piece to the institution.

Characterized as a holistic model that bundles services across three pillars of support — education and employment, work and income, and financial and asset-building — the full-fledged CWF model was not perceived by administrators as fitting well with CCBC's structure because it crossed both student services and instructional departments. Unanswerable questions were where to house a complete CWF model in CCBC's institutional structure and how to generate the universal buy-in required for such a holistic approach. In the end, administrators decided to focus on ways in which CCBC could intensively deliver the financial coaching piece of the CWF approach. CCBC applied for grant funding to offer financial coaching to at-risk students, who were identified as students requesting emergency assistance.

### Implementation Phase

Grant funding pursued by CCBC required that staff members hired to work as financial coaches attend financial coaching training. CCBC elected to use training offered through

Central New Mexico Community College's CNM Connect program, not realizing the challenge of getting future coaches to participate in the five-day training. To address this challenge, the coordinator of developmental education, who serves as the Money Matters @ CCBC program manager and leads the effort at CCBC, provided a modified version of the training she received through Central New Mexico Connect that was customized to CCBC's needs. This included a special focus on the philosophy that students should be perceived as resourceful rather than broken. The coordinator worked with the funding partner, MDC, to both ensure that the competency-based financial coaching training complied with its guidelines and to provide MDC with an opportunity to weigh in on suggested revisions to the training model.

CCBC Cares' financial coaches are required to have a college education as well as an empathetic philosophy toward people with limited resources. The educational requirements are in place to screen for staff who possess strong soft skills and are capable of being articulate and empathetic toward students in need of coaching. Good communications skills are critical for dealing with people in difficult situations and for demonstrating cultural sensitivity since the meaning of money can vary by group. For instance, the coordinator led a session with the coaches-in-training on the topic of conspicuous consumption and why a student might have an iPhone but no textbooks. The goal is to encourage coaching from a realistic standpoint, free of judgment, rather than from the angle of what people should or should not do.

The initial plan for staffing CCBC Cares was to have three trained coaches, two paid and one volunteer, to cover each campus. While two of the coaches who received the training were deemed good fits, even after the training, a volunteer from Americorps did not have the educational background, expertise, and job experience to work with participants in the way CCBC Cares required. Instead she was put to use promoting CCBC Cares across the three campuses and generating traffic to the CCBC Cares locations within the college's Student Success Centers. In retrospect, this modification filled an unanticipated need for marketing.

CCBC Cares planned to target those students who had requested emergency assistance with opportunities for financial coaching. The targeting strategy proposed in the grant application described the intention to move emergency funds from the control of the CCBC Foundation, which had no contact with students, to the financial aid department. This would also enable CCBC Cares to monitor student requests for emergency assistance and ensure follow up to try to connect students to financial coaching. While this strategy made sense as a way to act on a teachable moment, students requesting emergency assistance were often nonresponsive to outreach by CCBC Cares' financial coaches. As such, the need for active promotion of CCBC Cares emerged and was, in part, addressed through the modified role of the Americorps volunteer who had been redirected into promotional efforts.

CCBC Cares operates primarily from the Student Success Centers (CCBC's tutoring centers), where the program manager is located, although there is not a designated physical space used solely for the purpose of financial coaching. Finding an established home for the program has been challenging, because the institution continues to grapple with where the program organizationally belongs. Some staff consider the program to be a student services function. However, others interpret the disruptive nature of students' financial challenges as impacting the classroom first, which suggests that financial coaching is an instruction-based intervention. Yet others believe that an integrative model operating across



different departments might be a more ideal setup. Since its inception, CCBC Cares has resided under the auspices of the instructional area, but where the program will remain is an ongoing discussion.

A combination of efforts by the Americorps volunteer and other staff members of CCBC Cares were used to drive traffic into the program. Outreach efforts have included the following:

- flyers distributed across campuses,
- student surveys conducted to assess interest and experience with applying for scholarship money, and
- events organized by the Office of Student Life, such as “Get Involved Fairs” that offer students the opportunity to win raffle prizes if they compel their peers to work on financial goals with CCBC Cares financial coaches.

CCBC Cares employs an intake process for all students who meet with a financial coach for any one of the three tiers of service. Data collected include student name, ID number, tier(s) of service, establishment of S.M.A.R.T. goals, appointment date(s), and frequency of visits.

### Utilization and Effectiveness

Capacity limitations are always a concern with regard to the scaling up of a program. At this point, CCBC Cares has reported serving 185 students to date. This has included a mix of students who received different tiers of service. With more staffing, it is conceivable that the program could serve additional students and be able to demonstrate higher retention and completion outcomes, as Central New Mexico Community College’s CNM Connect has reported.<sup>4</sup>

CCBC Cares has responded to implementation challenges by modifying the program, as needed. For example, the challenge of getting part-time coaches to participate in a five-day out-of-state training was addressed by modifying the training and delivering it themselves. The challenge of utilizing a volunteer who did not have the requisite skills to do coaching was addressed by using her in a different but needed function, marketing. In short, CCBC responded to the challenges by modifying roles and changing the delivery method and philosophical approach to the training.

### Success, Challenges, and Funding

For CCBC Cares to continue growing, it will need to be institutionalized. The combined grant funding that helped launch CCBC Cares requires a lot of staff time to manage and is not a sustainable funding strategy. The coordinator leading CCBC Cares believes that data collection and the ability to demonstrate program effectiveness are critical to generating widespread buy-in for an institutionalized plan. As her role is currently structured, she fulfills an institutional role in developmental education and leads CCBC Cares, a dual role that results in her capacity being limited.

Another challenge related to planning an institutionalization strategy is determining where to house CCBC Cares permanently. Coaching sometimes crosses into social service delivery mechanisms. For example, a financial coach might need to help a food-insecure student access the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (formerly known as food stamps) as a form of income support to overcome the economic barrier of being unable to afford food.



CCBC is unsure at this time whether the program will grow to include the full Center for Working Families model. Faced with fiscal constraints, the institution would be challenged to dedicate physical and human resources necessary for a large, comprehensive program on multiple campuses. On the other hand, CCBC sees the value in that strategy in order to retain its current, financially at-risk population. Without having a specific plan for expansion, CCBC anticipates that the “next steps” vision will be dedicated to finding ways to make financial coaching more scalable so that more students can take advantage of the program.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, State & County QuickFacts. Data was derived from population estimates, the American Community Survey, the Census of Population and Housing, County Business Patterns, the Economic Census, the Survey of Business Owners, the Building Permits Survey, and the Census of Governments.
- <sup>2</sup> Details for this case study were gathered during an informal phone interview with Sonya Caesar, coordinator of developmental education and *Money Matters @ CCBC* program manager, on February 10, 2014. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2011–12, <http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/>.
- <sup>3</sup> Edwin A. Locke, “Toward a Theory of Task Motivation and Incentives,” *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance* 2, no. 3 (1968): 157-189.
- <sup>4</sup> Determining how outcomes differ among students leveraging CNM Connect is not based upon comparable treatment and control groups. But, to date, student outcomes are progressing in the right direction to justify the use of more rigorous evaluation techniques to attribute the impacts of the program with confidence.